Isaac Asimov THE CIRCLE OF THE EARTH

THE MAGAZINE OF Fantasy & Science Fiction

FEBRUARY

HIGH STEEL
by Jack C. Haldeman and Jack Dann

Thomas M. Disch
Susan C. Petrey
Phyllis Eisenstein

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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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FEBRUARY • 33rd Year of Publication

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The idea of having a go at a second chance at life is a fairly familiar one in sf, but there is nothing old-hat in this fresh and ironic vision from Thomas M. Disch, in which Richard Roe, an empty page waiting to be filled, comes to Boulder, Colorado to work and hike and, well, look for a purpose in life....

Understanding Human Behavior

A ROMANCE OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

BY
THOMAS M. DISCH

He would wake up each morning with a consciousness clear as the Boulder sky, a sense of being on the same wave length exactly as the sunlight. Innocence, bland dreams, a healthy appetite — these were glories that issued directly from his having been erased. Of course there were some corresponding disadvantages. His job, monitoring the terminals of a drive-in convenience center, could get pretty dull, especially on days when no one drove in for an hour or so at a stretch, and even at the busiest times it didn't provide much opportunity for human contact. He envied the waitresses in restaurants and the drivers of buses their chance to say hello to real live customers.

Away from work it was different; he didn't feel the same hunger for socializing. That, in fact, was the major disadvantage of having no past life, no established preferences, no identity in the usual sense of a history to attach his name to — he just didn't *want* anything very much.

Not that he was bored or depressed or anything like that. The world was all new to him and full of surprises: the strangeness of anchovies; the beauty of old songs in their blurry Muzak versions at the Stop-and-Shop; the feel of a new shirt or a March day. These sensations were not wholly unfamiliar, nor was his mind a *tabula rasa*. His use of the language and his motor skills were all intact; also what the psychologists at Delphi Institute called generic recognition. But none of the occasions of newness *reminded* him of any earlier experience, some first time or best time or worst time that he'd survived. His only set of memories of a personal and non-generic character were those he'd brought from the halfway house in

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Delphi, Indiana. But such fine memories they were — so fragile, so distinct, so privileged. If only (he often wished) he could have lived out his life in the sanctuary of Delphi, among men and women like himself, all newly summoned to another life and responsive to the wonders and beauties around them. But, no, for reasons he could not understand, the world insisted on being organized otherwise. An erasee was allowed six months at the Institute, and then he was despatched to wherever he or the computer decided, where he would have to live like everyone else, either alone or in a family (though the Institute advised everyone to be wary at first of establishing primary ties), in a small room or a cramped house or a dormitory ship in some tropical lagoon. Unless you were fairly rich or very lucky, your clothes, furniture, and suchlike appurtenances were liable to be rough, shabby, makeshift. The food most people ate was an incitement to infantile gluttony, a slop of sugars, starches and chemically enhanced flavors. It would have been difficult to live among such people and to seem to share their values except so few of them ever questioned the reasonableness of their arrangements. Those who did, if they had the money, would probably opt, eventually, to have their identities erased, since it was clear, just looking around, that erasees seemed to strike the right intuitive balance between being aware and keeping calm.

He lived now in a condo on the northwest edge of the city, a room and a half with unlimited off-peak power access. The rent was modest (so was his salary), but his equity in the condo was large enough to suggest that his pre-erasure income had been up there in the top percentiles.

He wondered, as all erasees do, why he'd decided to wipe out his past. His life had gone sour, that much was sure, but how and why were questions that could never be answered. The Institute saw to that. A shipwrecked marriage was the commonest reason statistically, closely followed by business reverses. At least that was what people put down on their questionnaires when they applied to the Institute. Somehow he doubted those reasons were the real ones. People who'd never been erased seemed oddly unable to account for their behavior. Even to themselves they would tell the unlikeliest tales about what they were doing and why. Then they'd spend a large part of their social life exposing each others' impostures and laughing at them. A sense of humor they called it. He was glad he didn't have one, yet.

Most of his free time he spent making friends with his body. In his first weeks at the halfway house he'd lazed about, ate too much junk food, and started going rapidly to seed. Erasees are not allowed to leave their new selves an inheritance of obesity or addiction, but often the body one wakes

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up in is the hasty contrivance of a crash diet. The mouth does not lose its appetites, nor the metabolism its rate, just because the mind has had memories whited out. Fortunately he'd dug in his heels, and by the time he had to bid farewell to Delphi's communal dining room he'd lost the pounds he'd put on and eight more besides.

Since then, fitness had been his religion. He bicycled to work, to Stop-and-Shop, and all about Denver, exploring its uniformities. He hiked and climbed on weekends. He jogged. Once a week, at a Y, he played volleyball for two hours, just as though he'd never left the Institute. He also kept up the other sport he'd had to learn at Delphi, which was karate. Except for the volleyball, he stuck to the more solitary forms of exercise, because on the whole he wasn't interested in forming relationships. The lecturers at the halfway house had said this was perfectly natural and nothing to worry about. He shouldn't socialize until he felt hungry for more society than his job and his living arrangements naturally provided. So far that hunger had not produced a single pang. Maybe he was what the Institute called a natural integer. If so, that seemed an all-right fate.

What he did miss, consciously and sometimes achingly, was a purpose. In common with most fledgling erasees, there was nothing he *believed* in — no religion, no political idea, no ambition to become famous for doing something better than somebody else. Money was about the only purpose he could think of, and even that was not a compelling purpose. He didn't lust after more and more and more of it in the classical Faustian go-getter way.

His room and a half looked out across the tops of a small plantation of spruces to the highway that climbed the long southwestward incline into the Rockies. Each car that hummed along the road was like a vector-quantity of human desire, a quantum of teleological purpose. He might have been mistaken. The people driving those cars might be just as uncertain of their ultimate destinations as he was, but seeing them whiz by in their primary colors, he found that hard to believe. Anyone who was prepared to bear the expense of a car surely had somewhere he wanted to get to or something he wanted to do more intensely than *he* could imagine, up here on his three-foot slab of balcony.

He didn't have a telephone or a tv. He didn't read newspapers or magazines, and the only books he ever looked at were some old textbooks on geology he'd bought at a garage sale in Denver. He didn't go to movies. The ability to suspend disbelief in something that had never happened was one he'd lost when he was erased, assuming he'd ever had it. A lot of the time he couldn't suspend his disbelief in the real people around him, all their pushing and pulling, their weird fears and whopping lies, their endless urges to

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control other people's behavior, like the vegetarian cashier at the Stop-and-Shop or the manager at the convenience center. The lectures and demonstrations at the halfway house had laid out the basics, but without explaining any of it. Like harried parents the Institute's staff had said, "Do this," and "Don't do that," and he'd not been in a position to argue. He did as he was bid, and his behavior fit as naturally as an old suit.

His name — the name by which he'd christened his new self before erasure — was Richard Roe, and that seemed to fit too.

II

At the end of September, three months after coming to Boulder, Richard signed up for a course in *Consumership: Theory and Practice* at the Naropa Adult Education Center. There were twelve other students in the class, all with the dewy, slightly vulnerable look of recent erasure. They sat in their folding chairs, reading or just blank, waiting for the teacher, who arrived ten minutes late, out of breath and gasping apologies. Professor Astor. While she was still collecting punchcards and handing out flimsy xeroxes of their reading list, she started lecturing to them. Before she could get his card (he'd chosen a seat in the farthest row back), she was distracted by the need to list on the blackboard the three reasons that people wear clothing, which are:

1. Utility,
2. Communication, and
3. Self-Concept.

Utility was obvious and didn't need going into, while Self-Concept was really a sub-category of Communication, a kind of closed-circuit transmission between oneself and a mirror.

"Now, to illustrate the three basic aspects of Communication, I have some slides." She sat down behind the A/V console at the front of the room and fussed with the buttons anxiously, muttering encouragements to herself. Since the question was there in the air, he wondered what her black dress was supposed to be communicating. It was a wooly, baggy, practical dress sprinkled with dandruff and gathered loosely about the middle by a wide belt of cracked patent leather. The spirit of garage sales hovered about it. "There!" she said.

But the slide that flashed on the screen was a chart illustrating cuts of beef. "Damn," she said, "that's next week. Well, it doesn't matter. I'll write it on the board."

When she stood up and turned around, it seemed clear that one of the utilitarian functions of her dress was to disguise or obfuscate some twenty-plus pounds of excess baggage. A jumble of thin bracelets jingled as she wrote on the board:

1. Desire,
2. Admiration,
3. Solidarity.

"There," she said, laying down the

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chalk and swinging round to face them, setting the heavy waves of black hair to swaying pendulously, "It's as simple as red, white, and blue. These are the three types of response people try to elicit from others by the clothes they wear. Blue, of course, would represent solidarity. Policemen wear blue. French workingmen have always worn a blinding blue. And then there's the universal uniform of blue denim. It's a cool color and tends to make those who wear it recede into the background. They vanish into the blue, so to speak.

"Then white." She took a blank piece of paper from her desk and held it up as a sample of whiteness. "White is for white-collar workers, the starched white shirt wearable only for a single day being a timeless symbol of conspicuous consumption. I wish the slide projector worked for this: I have a portrait by Hals of a man wearing one of those immense Dutch collars, and you couldn't begin to imagine the work-hours that must hve gone into washing and ironing the damned thing. The money. Basically that's what our second category is about. There's a book by Thorstein Veblen on the reading list that explains it all. Admittedly there are qualities other than solvency and success we may be called upon to *admire* in what people wear: good taste, a sense of paradox or wit, even courage, as when one walks through a dangerous neighborhood without the camouflage of denim. But good taste usually boils down to money: the good taste of petroleum-derived polyesters as against—" She smiled and ran her hand across the piled cloth of her dress. "—the *bad* taste of wool. Wit, likewise, is usually the wit of combining contradictory class-recognition signals in the same costume — an evening gown, say, trimmed with Purina patches. You should all be aware, as consumers, that the chief purpose of spending a lot of money on what you wear is to proclaim your allegiance to money *per se*, and to a career devoted to earning it, or, in the case of diamond rings, the promise to keep one's husband activated. Though in this case we begin to impinge on the realm of desire."

To all of which he gave about as much credence as he gave to actors in ads. Like most theories it made the world seem more, not less, complicated. Ho-hum, thought he, as he doodled a crisp doodle of a many-faceted diamond. But then, as she expounded her ideas about Desire, he grew uneasy, then embarrassed, and finally teed-off.

"Red," she said, reading from her deck of three-by-fives, "is the color of desire. Love is always like a red, red rose. It lies a-bleeding like a beautiful steak in a supermarket. To wear red is to declare oneself ready for action, especially if the color is worn below the waist."

There he sat in the back row in his red shorts and red sneakers thinking angry red thoughts. He refused to be-

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lieve it was a coincidence. He was wearing red shorts because he'd bicycled here, a five-mile ride, not because he wanted to semaphore his instant availability to the world at large. He waited till she'd moved off the subject of Desire, then left the classroom as inconspicuously as possible. In the Bursar's Office he considered the other Wednesday-night possibilities, mostly workshops in posture or poetry or suchlike. Only one — *A Survey of Crime in 20th Century America* — offered any promise of explaining people's behavior. So that was the one he signed up for.

The next day instead of going to work he went out to New Focus and watched hang-gliders. The most amazing of them was a crippled woman who arrived in a canvas sling. Rochelle Rockefeller's exploits had made her so famous that even Richard knew about her, not only on account of her flying but because she was one of the founding mothers of New Focus and had been involved in sizable altercations with the state police. The two women who carried her down from New Focus in the sling busied themselves with straps and buckles and then, at Rochelle's nod, launched her off the side of the cliff. She rose, motor-assisted, on the updraught and waved to her daughter, who sat watching on the edge of the cliff. The girl waved back. Then the girl went off by herself to the picnic table area where two rag dolls awaited her atop one of the tables.

He walked over to the table and asked if she minded if he shared the bench with her.

She shook her head and then in a rather dutiful tone introduced her dolls. The older was Ms. Chillywiggles, the younger was Ms. Sillygiggles. They were married. "And *my* name is Rochelle, the same as my mother. What's yours?"

"Richard Roe."

"Did you bring any *food*?"

"No. Sorry."

"Oh, well, we'll just have to pretend. Here's some tuna fish, and here's some cake." She doled out the imaginary food with perfunctory mime to her dolls, and then with exaggerated delicacy she held up — what was it? — something for him.

"Open your mouth and close your eyes," she insisted.

He did, and felt her fingers on his tongue.

"What was that?" he asked, afterward.

"Holy Communion. Did you like it?"

"Mm."

"Are you a Catholic?"

"No, unless that just made me one."

"*We* are. We believe in God the Father Almighty and *everything*. Ms. Chillywiggles was even in a *convent* before she got married. Weren't you?" Ms. Chillywiggles nodded her large wobbly head.

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Finding the subject uncomfortable, he changed it. "Look at your mother up there now. Wow."

Rochelle sighed and for a moment, to be polite, glanced up to where her mother was soaring, hundreds of feet above.

"It's incredible, her flying like that."

"That's what everyone says. But you don't need your leg muscles for a hang-glider, just your arms. And her arms are very strong."

"I'll bet."

"*Some* day we're going to go to Denver and see the dolls' Pope."

"Really. I didn't know dolls had a Pope."

"They do."

"Will you look at her now!"

"I don't like to, it makes me sick. I didn't want to come today, but no one would look after me. They were all *building*. So I had to."

"It doesn't make you want to fly someday, seeing her up there like that?"

"No. Some day she's going to kill herself. She knows it, too. That's how she had her accident, you know. She wasn't always in a wheelchair."

"Yes, I've heard that."

"What's so awful for *me* is to think she won't ever be able to receive the Last Sacrament."

The sun glowed through the red nylon wings of the glider, but even Professor Astor would have had a hard time making that fit her theory. Desire! Why not just Amazement?

"If she does kill herself," Rochelle continued dispassionately, "*we'll* be sent to an orphanage. In Denver, I hope. And Ms. Chillywiggles will be able to do missionary work among the dolls there. Do you have any dolls?"

He shook his head.

"I suppose you think dolls are only for *girls*. That's a very old prejudice, however. Dolls are for anyone who *likes* them."

"I may have had dolls when I was younger. I don't know."

"Oh. Were you erased?"

He nodded.

"So was my mother. But I was only a baby then. So I don't remember any more about her than she does. What I think is she must have committed some really terrible sin, and it tortured her so much she decided to be erased. Do you ever go in to Denver?"

"Sometimes."

Ms. Sillygiggles whispered something in Ms. Chillywiggles' ear, who evidently did not agree with the suggestion. Rochelle looked cast down. "Damn," she said.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, nothing. Ms. Sillygiggles was hoping *you'd* be able to take them to Denver to see the dolls' Pope, but Ms. Chillywiggles put her foot down and said Absolutely Not. You're a stranger: we shouldn't even be talking to you."

He nodded, for it seemed quite true. He had no business coming out to New Focus at all.

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"I should be going," he said.

Ms. Sillygiggles got to her feet and executed an awkward curtsey. Rochelle said it had been nice to make his acquaintance. Ms. Chillywiggles sat on the wooden step and said nothing.

It seemed to him, as he walked down the stony path to where he'd locked his bicycle to a rack, that everyone in the world was crazy, that craziness was synonymous with the human condition. But then he could see, through a break in the close-ranked spruces, the arc of a glider's flight — not Rochelle Rockefeller's, this one had blue wings — and his spirits soared with the sheer music of it. He understood, in a moment of crystalline levelheadedness, that it didn't make a speck of difference if people were insane. Or if he was, for that matter. Sane and insane were just stages of the great struggle going on everywhere all the time: across the valley, for instance, where the pines were fighting their way up the sides of the facing mountain, hurling the grenades of their cones into the thin soil, pressing their slow advantage, enduring the decimations of the lightning, aspiring (insanely, no doubt) toward the forever unreachable fastness of the summit.

When he got to the road his lungs were heaving, his feet hurt, and his knees were not to be reasoned with (he should not have been running along such a path), but his head was once again solidly fixed on his shoulders. When he called his boss at the Denver Central Office to apologize for absconding, he wasn't fired or even penalized. His boss, who was usually such a tyrannosaurus, said everyone had days when they weren't themselves, and that it was all right, so long as they were few and far between. He even offered some Valiums, which Richard said no-thank-you to.

III

At Naropa the next Wednesday, the lecturer, a black man in a spotless white polyester suit, lectured about Ruth Snyder and Judd Gray, who, in 1927, had killed Ruth's husband Albert in a more than usually stupid fashion. He'd chosen this case, he said, because it represented the lowest common denominator of the crime of passion and would therefore serve to set in perspective the mystery and romance of last week's assassinations, which Richard had missed. First they watched a scene from an old comedy based on the murder, and then the lecturer read aloud a section of the autobiography Judd Gray had written in Sing Sing while waiting to be electrocuted:

> "I was a morally sound, sober, God-fearing chap, working and saving to make Isabel my wife and establish a home. I met plenty of girls — at home and on the road, in trains and hotels. I could, I thought, place every type: the nice girl who flirts, the nice girl who doesn't, the brazen out-and-out streetwalker I was warned against. I was no sensualist, I studied no modern cults, thought nothing about inhibitions

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and repressions. Never read Rabelais in my life. Average, yes — just one of those Americans Mencken loves to laugh at. Even belonged to a club — the Club of Corset Salesmen of the Empire State — clean-cut competitors meeting and shaking hands — and liking it."

There was something in the tone of Judd Gray's voice, so plain, so accepting, that made Richard feel not exactly a kinship, more a sense of being similarly puzzled and potentially out of control. Maybe it was just the book's title that got to him — *Doomed Ship*. He wondered, not for the first time, whether he might not be among the fifteen per cent of erasees whose past has been removed by judicial fiat rather than by choice. He could, almost, imagine himself outside the Snyder bedroom in Queens Village, getting steadily more soused as he waited for Albert to go to sleep so that then he could sneak in there and brain him with the sash weight in his sweaty hand. All for the love of Ruth Snyder, as played by Carol Burnett. He couldn't, however, see himself as a more dignified sort of criminal — a racketeer or an assassin or the leader of a cult — for he lacked the strength of character and the conviction that those roles would have required, and he'd probably lacked it equally in the life that had been erased.

After the class he decided he'd tempt Fate and went to the cafeteria, where Fate immediately succumbed to the temptation and brought Professor Astor of *Consumership: Theory and Practice* to his table with a slice of viscid, bright cherry cheesecake. "May I join you?" she asked him.

"Sure. I was just going anyhow."

"I like your suit," she said. This close she seemed younger, or perhaps it was her dress that made that difference. Instead of last week's black wool bag she was wearing a dull blue double-knit with a scarf sprinkled with blurry off-red roses. One glance and anyone would have felt sorry for her.

His suit was the same dull blue. He'd bought it yesterday at the Stop-and-Shop, where the salesman had tried to convince him not to buy it. With it he wore a wrinkled Wrinkle-Proof shirt and a tie with wide stripes of gray and ocher. "Thanks," he said.

"It's very '70's. You're an erasee, aren't you?"

"Mm."

"I can always tell another. I am too. With a name like Lady Astor I'd have to be, wouldn't I? I hope I didn't offend you by anything I said last week."

"No, certainly not."

"It wasn't directed at you personally. I just read what it said in my notes, which were taken, all of them, practically verbatim from *The Colors of the Flag*. We teachers are all cheats that way, didn't you know? There's nothing we can tell you that you won't find expressed better in a book. But of course learning, in that sense, isn't the reason for coming here."

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"No? What is then?"

"Oh, it's for meeting people. For playing new roles. For taking sides. For crying out loud."

"What?"

"That's an old expression — for crying out loud. From the '40's, I think. Actually your suit is more '40's than '70's. The '40's were *sincere* about being drab; the '70's played games."

"Isn't there anything that's just here and now, without all these built-in meanings?"

She poised her fork over the gleaming cheesecake. "Well," she said thoughtfully, then paused for a first taste of her dessert. "Mnyes, sort of. After you left last week, someone in the class asked if there wasn't a way one could be just anonymous. And what I said—" She took another bite of cheesecake. "—was that to my mind—" She swallowed. "—anonymity would come under the heading of solidarity, and solidarity is always solidarity *with* something — an idea, a group. Even the group of people who don't want to have anything to do with anyone else — even they're a *group*. In fact, they're probably among the largest."

"I'm amazed," he said, counterattacking on sheer irresistible impulse, "that you, a supposed expert on consumerism, can eat junk like the junk you're eating. The sugar makes you fat and gives you cancer, the dye causes cancer too and I don't know what else, and there's something in the milk powder that I just heard about that's lethal. What's the point of being erased if afterwards you lead a life as stupid as everybody else's?"

"Right," she said. She picked up a paper plate from an abandoned tray and with a decisive rap of her fist squashed the wedge of cheesecake flat. "No more! Never again!"

He looked at the goo and crumbs splattered across the table, as well as on her scarf (there was a glob on his tie too, but he didn't notice that), and then at her face, a study in astonishment, as though the cheesecake had exploded autonomously. He started to laugh, and then, as though given permission, she did too.

They stayed on, talking, in the cafeteria until it closed, first about Naropa, then about the weather. This was his first experience of the approach of winter, and he surprised himself at the way he waxed eloquent. He marveled at how the aspens had gone golden all at once, as though every tree on a single mountain were activated by one switch and when that switch was thrown, bingo, it was autumn; the way, day by day, the light dwindled as his half of the world tilted away from the sun; the way the heat had come on in his condo without warning and baked the poor coleus living on top of the radiator; the misery of bicycling in the so much colder rain; and what was most amazing, the calmness of everyone in the face of what looked to him like an unqualified catastrophe. Lady Astor made a few

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observations of her own, but mostly she just listened, smitten with his innocence. Her own erasure had taken place so long ago — she was evasive as to exactly when — that the world had no such major surprises in store for her. As the chairs were being turned upside down onto the tabletops, he made a vague semi-enthusiastic commitment to hike up to New Focus some mutually convenient Sunday morning, to which end they exchanged addresses and phone numbers. (He had to give his number at work.) Why? It must have been the demolition of that cheesecake, the blissful feeling, so long lost to him, of muscular laughter, as though a window had been opened in a stuffy room and a wind had rushed in, turning the curtains into sails and bring strange smells from the mountains outside.

In the middle of November the company re-assigned him to the central office in downtown Denver, where he was assistant Traffic Manager for the entire Rocky Mountain division. Nothing in his work at the convenience center had seemed to point in this direction, but as soon as he scanned the programs involved, it was all there in his head and fingers, lingering on like the immutable melody of 1 + 1 = 2.

The one element of the job that wasn't second nature was the increased human contact, which went on some days nonstop. Hi there, Dick, what do you think of this and what do you think of that, did you see the game last night, what's your opinion of the crisis, and would you *please* speak to Lloyd about the time he's spending in the john. Lloyd, when spoken to, insisted he worked just as hard in the john as in the office and said he'd cut down his time on the stool as soon as they allowed him to smoke at his desk. This seemed reasonable to Richard but not to the manager, who started to scream at him, calling him a zombie and a zeroid, and said he was fired. Instead, to nobody's great surprise, it was the manager who got the axe. So, after just two weeks of grooming, Richard was the new Traffic Manager with an office all his own with its own view of other gigantic office buildings and a staff of thirty-two, if you counted temps and part-timers.

To celebrate he went out and had the famous hundred-dollar dinner at the Old Millionaire Steak Ranch with Lloyd, now the assistant Traffic Manager, with not his own office but at least a steel partition on one side of his desk and the right, thereby, to carcinogenate his lungs from punch-in to punch-out. Lloyd, it turned out, after a second Old Millionaire martini, lived up at New Focus and was one of the original members of the Boulder branch of the cult.

"No kidding," said Richard, reverently slicing into his sirloin. "So why are you working down here in the city? You can't commute to New Focus. Not this time of year."

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"Money, why else. Half my salary, maybe more now, goes into the Corporation. We can't live for free, and there sure as hell isn't any money to be earned building a damned pyramid."

"So why do you build pyramids?"

"Come on, Dick. You know I can't answer that."

"I don't mean you as a group. I mean you personally. You must have *some* kind of reason for what you're doing."

Lloyd sighed long-sufferingly. "Listen, you've been up there, you've seen us cutting the blocks and fitting them in place. What's to explain? The beauty of the thing is that no one asks anyone else *why* we're doing what we're doing. Ever. That's Rule Number One. Remember that if you ever think of joining."

"Okay, then tell me this — why would I *want* to join?"

"Dick, you're hopeless. What did I just *say* to you? Enjoy your steak, why don't you? Do I ask why you want to throw away two hundred dollars on a dinner that can last, at the longest, a couple hours? No, I just enjoy it. It's beautiful."

"Mmn, I'm enjoying it. But still I can't keep from wondering."

"Wonder all you like — just don't ask."

IV

With the increased social inputs at work he had gradually tapered off on his visits to Naropa. Winter sealed him into a more circumscribed routine of apartment, job, and gym, as mounds of snow covered the known surfaces of Boulder like a divine amnesia. On weekends he would sit like a bear in a cave, knitting tubes of various dimensions and looking out the window and not quite listening to the purr of KMMN playing olden goldens in flattened-out, long-breathed renditions that corresponded in a semi-conscious way to the forms of the snow as it drifted and stormed and lifted up past the window in endless unraveling banners.

He had not forgotten his promise to Lady Astor, but a trip to New Focus was no longer feasible. Even with skis and a lift assisting, it would have been an overnight undertaking. He phoned twice and explained this to her answering machine. In reply she left a message — "That's okay." — at the convenience center, which got forwarded to the central office a week later. His first impression, that Destiny had introduced them with some purpose in mind, was beginning to diminish when one Saturday morning on the bus going to the gym he saw a street sign he'd never noticed before, Follet Avenue, and remembered that that was the street she lived on. He yanked the cord, got off, and walked back over unshoveled sidewalks to the corner of 34th and Follet, already regretting his impulse: 15 blocks to go, and then he might not find her home. It was 8 degrees below.

In the course of those 15 blocks the

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neighborhood dwindled from dowdy to stark. She lived in a two-story clapboard shopfront that looked like an illustration of the year daubed in black paint over the entrance: 1972. The shopwindows were covered with plywood, the plywood painted by some schizophrenic kindergarten with nightmarish murals, and the faded murals peered out forlornly from a lattice of obscene graffiti, desolation overlaying desolation.

He rang her bell and, when that produced no result, he knocked.

She came to the door wrapped in a blanket, hair in a tangle, bleary and haggard.

"Oh, it's you. I thought it might be you." Then, before he could apologize or offer to leave: "Well, you might as well come in. Leave your overshoes in the hall."

She had the downstairs half of the building, behind the boarded-up windows, which were sealed, on this side, with strips of carpet padding. A coal stove on a brick platform gave off a parsimonious warmth. With a creaking of springs Lady Astor returned to bed. "You can sit there," she said, gesturing to a chair covered with clothes. When he did, its prolapsed bottom sank under him like the seat of a rowboat. At once a scrawny tabby darted from one of the shadowy corners of the room (the only light came from a small unboarded window at the back) and sprang into his lap. It nuzzled his hand, demanding a caress.

While he stumbled through the necessary explanations (how he happened to be passing, why he hadn't visited before), she sipped vodka from a coffee cup. He assumed it was vodka, since a vodka bottle, half-empty and uncapped, stood on the cash register that served as a bedside table. Most of the shop-fittings had been left *in situ*: a glass counter, full of dishes and cookware; shelves bearing a jumble of shoes, books, ceramic pots, and antique, probably defunct electric appliances. A bas-relief Santa of molded plastic was affixed to the wall behind the bed, its relevance belied by layers of greasy dust. The room's cluttered oddity combated its aura of poverty and demoralization, but not enough: he felt stricken. This was another First in the category of emotions, and he didn't know what to call it. Not simply dismay; not guilt; not pity; not indignation (though how could anyone be drunk at ten o'clock on a Saturday morning!); not even awe for the spirit that could endure such dismalness and still appear at Naropa every Wednesday evening, looking more or less normative, to lecture on the theory and practice of (of all things) Consumership. All these elements and maybe others were fuddled together in what he felt.

"Do you want a drink?" she asked, and before he could answer: "Don't think it's polite to say yes. There's not much left. I started at six o'clock, but you have to understand I don't *usually*

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do this. But today seemed special. I thought, why not? Anyhow why am I making excuses. I didn't invite you, you appeared at the door. I knew you would, eventually." She smiled, not pleasantly, and poured half the remaining vodka into her coffee cup. "You like this place?"

"It's big," he said lamely.

"And dark. And gloomy. And a mess. I was going to get the windows put back in, when I took the lease last summer. But that costs. And for winter this is warmer. Anyhow if I did try to make it a shop I don't know what I'd sell. Junk. I *used* to throw pots. What *didn't* I used to do. I did a book of poetry based on the Tarot (which is how I latched onto the job at Naropa). I framed pictures. And now I lecture, which is to say I read books and talk about them to people like you too lazy to read books on their own. And once, long ago, I was even a housewife, would you believe that." This time her smile was positively lethal. There seemed to be some secret message behind what she was saying that he couldn't uncode.

He sneezed.

"Are you allergic to cats?"

He shook his head. "Not that I know of."

"I'll bet you are."

He looked at her with puzzlement, then at the cat curled in his lap. The cat's warmth had penetrated through the denim and warmed his crotch pleasantly.

"God damn it," she said, wiping a purely hypothetical tear from the corner of her bleary eye. "Why'd you have to pick this morning? Why couldn't you have phoned? You were always like that. You schmuck."

"What?"

"Schmuck," she repeated. And then, when he just went on staring: "Well, it makes no difference. I would have had to tell you eventually. I just wanted you to get to know me a little better first."

"Told me what?"

"I was never erased. I just lied about that. It's all there on the shelf, everything that happened, the betrayals, the dirt, the failures. And there were lots of those. I just never had the guts to go through with it. Same with the dentist. That's why I've got such lousy teeth. I *meant* to. I had the money — at least for a while, after the divorce, but I thought...." She shrugged, took a swallow from the cup, grimaced, and smiled, this time almost friendly.

"What did you husband do?"

"Why do you ask that?"

"Well, you seem to want to tell the whole story. I guess I wanted to sound interested."

She shook her head. "You still don't have a glimmering, do you?"

"Of what?" He did have a glimmering, but he refused to believe it.

"Well then, since you just insist, I'll have to tell you, won't I? *You* were the husband you're asking about. And you

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haven't changed one damned bit. You're the same stupid schmuck you were then."

"I don't believe you."

"That's natural. After spending so much to become innocent, who would want to see their investment wiped out like..." She tried to snap her fingers. "...that."

"There's no way you could have found me here. The Institute never releases that information. Not even to their employees."

"Oh, computers are clever these days (*you* know that), and for a couple thousand dollars it's not hard to persuade a salaried employee to tickle some data out of a locked file. When I found out where you'd gone, I packed my bags and followed you. I *told* you before you were erased that I'd track you down, and what you said was, 'Try, just try.' So that's what I did."

"You can be sent to prison for what you've done. Do you know that?"

"You'd like that, wouldn't you? If you could have had me locked up before, you wouldn't have had to get erased. You wouldn't have damned near killed me."

She said it with such conviction, with such a weariness modifying the anger, that it was hard to hold on to his reasonable doubt. He remembered how he'd identified with Judd Gray, the murderer of Albert Snyder.

"Don't you want to know *why* you tried to kill me?" she insisted.

"Whatever you used to be, Ms. Astor, you're not my wife now. You're a washed-up, forty-year-old drunk teaching an adult education course in the middle of nowhere."

"Yeah. Well, I could tell you how I got that way. Schmuck."

He stood up. "I'm leaving."

"Yes, you've said that before."

Two blocks from her house he remembered his overshoes. To hell with his overshoes! To hell with people who don't shovel their sidewalks! Most of all to hell with her!

That woman, his wife! What sort of life could they have lived together? All the questions about his past that he'd subdued so successfully up till now came bubbling to the surface: who he'd been, what he'd done, how it had all gone wrong. And she had the answers. The temptation to go back was strong, but before he could yield to it, the bus came in the homeward direction and he got on, his mind unchanged, his anger burning brightly.

V

Even so it was a week before he'd mustered the righteous indignation to call the Delphi Institute and register a formal complaint. They took down the information and said they'd investigate, which he assumed was a euphemism for their ignoring it. But in fact a week later he got a registered letter from them stating that Ms. Lady Astor of 1972 Follet Avenue in Boulder, Colorado, had never been his wife, nor had there ever been any

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other connection between them. Further, three other clients of the Institute had registered similar complaints about the same Ms. Astor. Unfortunately there was no law against providing erasees with misinformation about their past lives, and it was to be regretted that there were individuals who took pleasure in disturbing the equanimity of the Institute's clients. The letter pointed out that he'd been warned of such possibilities while he was at the halfway house.

Now in addition to feeling angry and off-balance he felt like an asshole as well. To have been so easily diddled! To have believed the whole unlikely tale without even the evidence of a snapshot!

Three days before Christmas she called him at work. "I didn't want to bother you," she said in a meek little whisper that seemed, even now, knowing everything, utterly sincere, "but I had to apologize. You did pick a hell of a time to come calling. If I hadn't been drunk I would never have spilled the beans."

"Uh-huh," was all he could think to say.

"I know it was wrong of me to track you down and all, but I couldn't help myself." A pause, and then her most amazing lie of all: "I just love you too much to let you go."

"Uh-huh."

"I don't suppose we could get together? For coffee, after work?"

When they got together for coffee, after work, he led her on from lie to lie until she'd fabricated a complete life for him, a romance as preposterous as any soap on tv, beginning with a tyrannical father, a doting mother, a twin brother killed in a car crash, and progressing through his years of struggle to become a painter. (Here she produced a brittle polaroid of one of his putative canvases, a muddy jumble of ochres and umbers. She assured him that the polaroid didn't do it justice.) The tale went on to tell how they'd met, and fallen in love, how he'd sacrificed his career as an artist to become an animation programmer. They'd been happy, and then — due to his monstrous jealousy — unhappy. There was more, but she didn't want to go into it, it was too painful. Their son....

Through it all he sat there nodding his head, seeming to believe each further fraud, asking appropriate questions, and (another First) enjoying it hugely — enjoying *his* fraudulence and her greater gullibility. Enjoying, too, the story she told him about his imaginary life. He'd never imagined a past for himself, but if he had he doubted if he'd have come up with anything so large, so resonant.

"So tell me," he asked, when her invention finally failed her, "why did I decide to be erased?"

"John," she said shaking flakes of dandruff from her long black hair, "I wish I could answer that question. Partly it must have been the pain of lit-

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tle Jimmy's death. Beyond that, I don't know."

"And now...?"

She looked up, glittery. "Yes?"

"What is it you want?"

She gave a sigh as real as life. "I hoped ... oh, you know."

"You want to get married again?"

"Well, no. Not till you've got to know me better anyhow. I mean I realize that from *your* point of view I'm still pretty much a stranger. And you've changed too, in some ways. You're like you were when I first met you. You're—" Her voice choked up, and tears came to her eyes.

He touched the clasp of his briefcase, but he didn't have the heart to take out the xerox of the letter from the Delphi Institute that he'd been intending to spring on her. Instead he took the bill from under the saucer and excused himself.

"You'll call me, won't you?" she asked woefully.

"Sure, sure. Let me think about it a while first. Okay?"

She mustered a brave, quavering smile. "Okay."

In April to mark the conclusion of the first year of his new life and just to glory in the weather that made such undertakings possible again, he took the lift up Mount Lifton, then hiked through Corporation Canyon past New Focus and the site of the pyramid — only eight feet at its highest edge so far, scarcely a tourist attraction — and on up the Five Waterfall Trail. Except for a few boot-challenging stretches of vernal bogginess the path was stony and steep. The sun shone, winds blew, and the last sheltered ribs of snow turned to water and sought, trickle by trickle, the paths of least resistance. By one o'clock he'd reached his goal, Lake Silence, a perfect little mortuary chapel of a tarn colonnaded all round with spruces. He found an unshadowed, accommodating rock to bask on, took off his wet boots and damp socks, and listened as the wind did imitations of cars on a highway. Then, chagrined, he realized it wasn't the wind but the shuddering roar of an approaching helicopter.

The helicopter emerged like a demiurge from behind the writhing tops of the spruces, hovered a moment above the tarn, then veered in the direction of his chosen rock. As it passed directly overhead a stream of water spiraled out of the briefly opened hatch, dissolving almost at once in the machine's rotary winds into a mist of rainbow speckles. His first thought was that he was being bombed, his next that the helicopter was using Lake Silence as a toilet. Only when the first tiny trout landed, splat, on the rock beside him did he realize that the helicopter must have been from the Forest Service and was seeding the lake with fish. Alas, it had missed its mark, and the baby trout had fallen on the rocks of the shore and into the branches of the surrounding trees. The waters

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of Lake Silence remained unrippled and inviolate.

He searched among those fallen along the shore — there were dozens — for survivors, but all that he could find proved inert and lifeless when he put them in the water. Barefoot, panicky, totally devoted to the trout of Lake Silence, he continued the search. At last among the matted damp needles beneath the spruces he found three fish still alive and wiggling. As he lowered them, lovingly, into the lake he realized in a single lucid flash what it was he had to do with his life.

He would marry Lady Astor.

He would join new Focus and help them build a pyramid.

And he would buy a car.

(Also, in the event that she became orphaned, he would adopt little Rochelle Rockefeller. But that was counting chickens.)

He went to the other side of Lake Silence, to the head of the trail, where the Forest Service had provided an emergency telephone link disguised as a commemorative plaque to Governor Dent. He inserted his credit card into the slot, the plaque opened, and he punched Lady Astor's number. She answered at the third ring.

"Hi," he said. "This is Richard Roe. Would you like to marry me?"

"Well, yes, I guess so. But I ought to tell you — I was never really your wife. That was a story I made up."

"I knew that. But it was a nice story. And I didn't have one that I could tell you. One more thing, though. We'll have to join New Focus and help them build their pyramid."

"Why?"

"You can't ask why. That's one of their rules. Didn't you know that?"

"Would we have to live up there?"

"Not year-round. It'd be more like having a summer place, or going to church on Sunday. Plus some work on the pyramid."

"Well, I suppose I could use the exercise. Why do you want to get married? Or is that another question I shouldn't ask?"

"Oh, probably. One more thing: what's your favorite color?"

"For what?"

"A car."

"A car!" Oh, I'd *love* a car! Be a show-off — get a red one. When do you want to do it?"

"I'll have to get a loan from the bank first. Maybe next week?"

"No, I meant getting married."

"We could do that over the phone. Or up here, if you want to take the lift to New Focus. Do you want to meet me there in a couple hours?"

"Make it three. I need a shampoo, and the bus isn't really reliable."

And so they were married, at sunset, on the stump of the unfinished pyramid, and the next week he bought a brand new Alizarin Crimson Ford Fundamental. As they drove out of the dealer's lot, he felt, for the first time in his life, that this was what it must be like to be completely human.

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Parke Godwin ("The Fire When It Comes," May 1981) recently finished an occult book, A COLD BLUE LIGHT, with Marvin Kaye. Howard Roller, like Mr. Godwin a former professional actor, has since turned to critical writing, dividing his time between film history and music and record reviewing.

Sergeant Pepper Variations

BY

HOWARD ROLLER and PARKE GODWIN

"I don't want an exorcist, Ron. I don't want a spirit medium. I want you."

So said David Ventre to begin it all. Without David Ventre, a pianist and musicologist of considerable stature, I'd never have heard of or seen Rosetta Hansen. But David I trust, and through his urging I listened to Rosetta play. Faced with the inexplicable, I lingered in that seedy hotel suite to hear more.

Concerning Rosetta Hansen, spirit mediums and musicologists alike have maintained a careful silence rather telltale in itself. They've seen the music on paper, but I was there. I saw David go from interest to electrified absorption as he scribbled furiously to capture what Rosetta played. The arguments go pro and con, supported or denied—

And still there are those incredible intervals in the *Variations*....

I'm a psychiatrist. Much as I respect David musically, I doubt if I'd have gone to the hotel if he'd explained anything beforehand. He clinched my indecision forcefully.

"Listen, Ron. You're not doing a damned thing tonight. Believe me, this is right up your alley."

My alley turned out to be a suite in a midtown hotel between Fifth and Sixth Avenues. With us in the dreary sitting room were two other men and a woman. One of the men was an Indian in a turban and off-white linen. The other man I knew — unfortunately. Krebs, an obnoxious second-string reporter whose fingernails were unsanitary where they weren't chewed, borderline drunk as usual, lamenting the waste of an evening more profitably spent at Yankee Stadium.

"I give up a good ball game for this, and we have to wait," he mourned.

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"New York and Boston. Guidry pitching."

On the way over, David had tossed off an allusion to Alouette Records, a company specializing in off-beat classical packaging. It didn't surprise me then when the door to an inner room opened and Elwood Dodd, one of Alouette's PR men entered and flashed his audience a professional smile.

"Good evening." Elwood rapidly disseminated fliers to each of us, allowing a minimum of speed-reading time to peruse the short blurb, then spoke again. "I'm not really sure of your advance word on this, so I'll do a short briefing on a truly remarkable lady. Her name is Rosetta Hansen. She's lived her entire life in Wizard's Clip, West Virginia. Miss Hansen never left her home before this trip."

Elwood paused and swept his eyes over us. "I stress this because, whatever she is, Miss Hansen is not a hoax. Her father is a carpenter and she is an identical twin. Twelve years ago, her sister drowned. Roughly ten years ago, Miss Hansen made what she claimed as her first contact with the spirit world through the medium of her sister."

Elwood paused again — he was always at pauses; part of his job, I supposed. Another *wunderkind*, I thought, but why the spiritualist angle?

"Rosetta wrote to us five years ago," Elwood went on. "Not about her sister, but — well, other personages she claims to have met. In short," Elwood posed before us, a magician with hat from which would emerge an inexplicable rabbit. "Miss Hansen asserts that she's had contact with several of history's most renowned composers."

Krebs groaned audibly. David looked at me and then at his shoes. I blew my nose quietly. The horn-rimmed woman took notes throughout. Only the Indian sat, impassive.

"I sense your skepticism," Elwood understated. "As professionals in various fields, try to view this with an open mind."

"That goes without comment, Elwood," David remarked. "Ron and I came to listen, not to laugh."

"Thank you." Elwood's glance passed over Krebs, who was hunched further down in his chair. "Knowing the circumstances to be improbable — to say the least — Miss Hansen provided a tape of some music she claims was personally communicated to her by Schubert, Bach, Liszt and others."

Krebs groaned louder, shifting in his chair, lamenting the lost Guidry. David's mouth was hidden behind folded hands, noncommittal. Music from beyond, I thought. A different approach, at least. Poor Elwood had to blow the horn for so many, fresh angles must be hard to come by.

"You've been invited tonight to meet Rosetta, to hear her music for yourselves, each of you providing a different expertise. Ron Clark, a trained psychiatrist and certainly knowledgeable about music. Dr. Bruce —"

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Elwood nodded to the woman. "A published authority on spirit phenomena. Rabat Haszan, an expert in the field sometimes called astral projection."

The turbaned gentleman nodded sagely.

"And of course David Ventre, a well-known pianist and critic. You, Mr. Krebs, are evidently the only staff member your paper saw fit to send."

"Thanks. I owed a favor."

"The other papers sent no one. I think they may be sorry."

Krebs half rose with a minimal attempt at manners. "I'll go if you want."

"No, no."

"No problem, Mr. Dodd. I could still catch six innings at the stadium."

"Please stay," Elwood urged. "Just that I'd hoped for one of the music critics."

Krebs sat down. "I just hope you're serious about this."

I intercepted Elwood as he moved toward the inner door. "Elwood," I murmured, "Krebs has a point. Is this build-up genuine?"

"Ron, I have to say a great many things about a great many artists. This time I'm quite serious."

"You mean you buy her?"

"Just listen." He opened the door. "Ready, Miss Hansen?"

"Oh, yes."

From the other room I caught the unmistakable Appalachian twang. Elwood motioned us to the inner room dominated by a small grand piano.

Rosetta Hansen was not at all what I expected; not the Madwoman of Chaillot in too much make-up and audible jewelry, not even remotely Estelle Winwood-ish. She stood by the piano, tentative, as if someone might ask her to leave, a small plump woman in a flower-print paisley dress that reminded me of faded wallpaper. She looked like West Virginia, like Lillian Gish. Someone who grew up with sidewalks that were quiet by nine o'clock every night, where you could hear the spring stretch and whine when someone opened an old screen door.

Equally quaint were the two long-haired cats, white and gray, who obviously enjoyed the unexpected company. They perked up as we entered, stretching themselves, rubbing against furniture and people's legs.

"Hello," Rosetta ventured. "Please excuse my girls, but I couldn't come without them. I hope no one's allergic."

The white cat jumped onto David's lap and settled herself. We exchanged a quick glance. The cat closed her eyes and purred contentedly.

"I guess you folks won't believe me," Rosetta launched her explanation. "I hardly do myself. But Louise and I, she's my sister, we're very close. I mean we were. I mean we were. Identical twins; you couldn't tell us apart. Oh, you could now. I've put on a little weight. Louise still looks like a size seven."

I met her tentative smile with an in-

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dulgent one of my own.

"We were very close. So, after her accident she began talking to me, mostly when I took my afternoon nap. Louise said I could come visit with her during my nap if I tried very hard. It took quite a while, but I was finally able to leave my body as it slept. Not for long. I wasn't very good at it at first, but like piano it gets easier. But that doesn't matter. Only the music is important. But there, I'm jumping ahead, aren't I."

One plump hand played nervously with the other, betraying her tension, which I felt was due more to unfamiliar people and surroundings than her bizarre narrative. She spoke hesitantly, not with the rushed, uninflected urgency of a neurotic. I caught Dave's eye again. He was stroking the cat. I think we were both beginning to like Rosetta Hansen.

"Louise and I always loved music. We played the organ at First Baptist on Sundays. We never had time to really study, but after she left us, something — I don't know what — just drove me to practice and practice every spare minute on the piano. I'm not very good, not nearly enough for —" She stopped abruptly; then with a nuance of apology: "Well, you'll see.

"Well ... when I could get around out of my body pretty well, visiting with Louise, she said she wanted me to meet some of her friends. We both make friends anywhere, Louise and I like people. And cats. So one time she brought me to see a gentleman — a lovely man, so shy. He played piano for me. Well, not a real piano. They just kind of think of playing music, and it's there. And when I got home, after I woke up, I could play it. Not well of course. I'm not a good sight-reader, and I can't write music, but somehow I could play what I heard from memory. And I *do* wish I could play better because of Mr. Liszt ... sorry. There I go jumping ahead again."

We sat open-mouthed, not knowing what to say — if anything said would even be in Miss Hansen's league. Elwood Dodd stood to one side, eyes closed and lips pursed like a smug Buddha. Dr. Bruce wrote furiously in her notebook. Rabat Haszan had been rapt since the first mention of the out-of-body experience. Krebs glanced his watch.

"Now, the shy gentleman introduced himself as Mr. Schubert," Rosetta went on. "He always sees me first."

Dr. Bruce's ballpoint shot up with a question. "You're saying Franz Schubert is your spirit guide?"

"I don't know what that is;" Rosetta answered. "But he comes first and then brings someone else to see me. You see, what they care about is the music because they've all gotten so much further now than when they were alive. They all get along fine, too. Well, Mr. Wagner can be very hard to get along with."

Rosetta pronounced *Wag* like *bag*.

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"And he uses such awful language with Mr. Mendelssohn and Mr. Gershwin. But George *does* make jokes with Mr. Wagner's music, playing it all mixed up with Mr. Berg's, things like that. But generally they all like each other and want their new music to be published and heard over here."

She turned quickly to Elwood. "Oh, not for money, Mr. Dodd. They don't need that. Just that they've gotten so much further than they did before. Mr. Schubert was only twenty-eight, he said, and all people know over here is the old music. Now, Mr. Beethoven — he's got a temper, but I just want to hug him, he's so real and honest — he suggested I use tape to record their music because I can't write it down. To help them reach people today with their new ideas, things that aren't outdated. Well, I guess I've talked enough. Let me play a few things for you."

She ended with her eyes on David. Politely he urged, "Yes, please do."

Rosetta opened the piano. "They play it so much better than I can, especially Mr. Liszt. He has some wonderful things that I can't *begin* to play, like Reflections on Luna that he wrote after the moon landing. He was very excited about that."

When Rosetta sat down to play, flexing her short fingers, I wondered if the music would measure up to her story. The two cats jumped up onto the grand and perched at opposite ends like the New York Public Library lions. One got the impression it was a ritual.

Rosetta announced the first piece as a capriccio by Brahms. She called it a "caprice," and I thought: if this woman's fake, she's one of the best. How much or little education she might have was impossible to gauge. The music itself was disappointing, vaguely Brahmsian with arpeggios in the left hand that she didn't negotiate at all well, and the usual Brahms chord progressions. Not very interesting, but then Brahms himself wrote some dull pieces.

Next was an alledged Schubert impromptu, quite lovely, with that limpid lyricism one associates with Schubert. Rosetta managed it somewhat better than the Brahms, and it could well have been Schubert, but what was new about it? Any well-trained and creative music student might have written it, though every now and then I heard a chord that echoed from a later period.

I was not terribly impressed or even piqued until Rosetta began the third offering, a strange and confused piece called *Blues Melody*.

"By Duke Ellington and Maurice Ravel," she announced.

Ellington and Ravel? Hard to swallow, though the piece was too formal for one and too soulful for the other. Bemused, Dave just shrugged helplessly while Rosetta struggled through the short but intricate composition.

"I don't play this well at all," she apologized. "But old Duke, he can.

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He's the finest colored gentleman I ever met. Just that he's new there, like John, and not comfortable with the mind piano yet, so Ravel helped out because he always admired Duke's music."

I felt a vague uneasiness and a coherent doubt began to fog my judgment. If this woman wasn't educated, someone very subtle was. Who? And how did he or she coach a limited talent into this display?

"This last piece is called *Sergeant Pepper Variations*," Rosetta said.

Dave roused himself to ask a question. "You mean the Beatles number?"

She nodded. "I guess so. I only know John. Mr. Lennon. He just arrived and isn't settled yet. Mr. Bach wrote this because he likes John's music. It really sounds better on the organ."

What could we think? The theme was indeed the Beatle tune, and Bach's hand was unmistakable. She played it too slowly for proper effect and couldn't handle the ornamentation, but how did she know it at all? It's easy to imitate Baroque style but damned hard to sound like Bach himself. His chords are somehow inevitable. As it fell on the ear, the piece was hard to doubt, simple yet perfect, and I longed to hear it played by someone like David. He looked at me, the same wish in his eyes.

"But no sheet music, of course," I whispered.

The implication hit us then. Rosetta was playing all of this with no music.

She finished with a mangled flourish and looked up expectantly. The gray cat hopped off the piano into her arms. Elwood stepped forward.

"What you've just heard is to be an Alouette release for month after next. Needless to say, any media coverage should be sensitively handled."

Dozing through the last two pieces, Krebs bestirred himself and rose, a case of terminal boredom. "Just tell me this, lady: where's Judge Crater? Or has anyone tipped you to the real identity of Jack the Ripper?"

Rosetta flushed at his boorish guffaw. Her pressed-flower face set in sad resignation.

"Is that all you can say, Krebs?" Elwood prompted. "Not that I expected much more."

"Yeah." Krebs squinted at his watch and started for the door. "Well ... four innings left, maybe." He punctuated his exit with a small belch. So much for the fourth estate.

The Indian, meanwhile, was at Rosetta's side in an earnest if one-sided conversation, gesticulating, speaking a rapid but unintelligible English. I caught a fragment now and then. He referred to something called Eckankar and wanted to work with Rosetta to help her spiritual self-realization so that she could attain Anami Lok and recognize Sugmad.

"Who is Sugmad?" Rosetta inquired politely.

Rabat Haszan's eyes widened at the ignorance. "Madam, Sugmad is Lord of All, the Ultimate Being. We study

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the science of soul travel to reach Sugmad and be illuminated."

Her answer was polite but parochial. "I'm sorry, Mr. ... Rabbit? I'm a Baptist and received Jesus when I was thirteen. I have no wish to be illuminated. I only came here because of the music."

"Ah." He stepped back, the brows falling. "I see. I see." Rabat Haszan bowed several times, excused himself profusely to Elwood and Rosetta, and left.

Dr. Bruce — she of the mannish suit — rose and barked: "Ms. Hansen? A few questions if you please."

Rosetta beamed. "Of course."

Dr. Bruce twiddled her ballpoint. "About the visits with your sister Louise. Does she ever appear to you in this world or do you always travel to hers?"

Rosetta admitted she did the traveling.

"And your journeys are always during sleep?"

"Yes, always."

Dr. Bruce beckoned Elwood aside. I was in earshot and eager to hear the assessment of science.

"I don't think this qualifies as a legitimate phenomenon. At no time are there any actual spirit manifestations verifiable by objective observers. Many supposed phenomena can occur in sleep. This is simply overactive imagination."

Elwood fumbled for words, not ready for this criticism. I jumped in out of mercy and curiosity.

"Doctor, how do you proceed with other cases like this?"

"There are routine tests, behavioral profiles, etc. We could monitor her dreams, but that produces little. It is time-consuming, expensive and, in this case, not terribly provocative. Many people meet notables in their dreams. They never seem to encounter pedestrian types on these trips. The fact that they're musicians only echoes her own interest."

"But the music," I urged. "What do you make of that?"

"Right," Elwood returned to the fray. "Look, how can she sound like Bach when she doesn't even write music or improvise and plays like a third-year student?"

"Well, that?" Dr. Bruce waved it away. "Many people have knowledge in the subconscious that they don't admit to or are aware of. This makes it impressive to them but hardly proves an extraterrestrial source."

Elwood shook his head. "Sounds like your mind is made up."

"You'll have to excuse me." Dr. Bruce gathered up her bag and topcoat. "I have a plane to catch. There's a possessed child in Minnesota...."

And the lady took her leave, hard science abandoning the dilettantes.

"Not a music lover," I judged. "And it's all in a day's work to her."

Elwood agreed. "Jaundiced. Do *you* think someone's subconscious could improvise Bach?"

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"Hardly, unless they're Gould or Landowska."

"Don't feel badly, please." Rosetta came to us, carrying the gray cat. "You've really done your level best, Mr. Dodd. And these nice gentlemen haven't left."

David Ventre came out of his brown study. "I don't know, Elwood. I like the Bach piece. But there's her musical training or the lack of it."

"I know what you're thinking," said Elwood. "She sight-reads poorly, can't improvise, and you heard her play. God! Why won't *someone* just consider the possibility of truth. My boss just laughs like I'm coming off the wall with this." He took a deep, prophetic breath. "You know what'll happen. We'll cut one record as a novelty. Then it'll be forgotten. But what if she's telling the truth? Just suppose."

Rosetta's back straightened. "I am telling the truth." She stared at me. I dropped my eyes. "The only thing I feel badly about is their music. There's more, much more than I've been able to learn. I don't play or read well at all, I'm sorry."

"Don't be, Rosetta." Dave turned to Elwood. "Do you have any music paper? I'd really like to note down the Bach piece. Rosetta, if you'll play it again, slowly, I can note it down. Who knows? Perhaps I can put it into a recital as an encore. I'm not saying that I believe, but...."

Rosetta's smile was no longer tentative. "Thank you. Mr. Bach will be so

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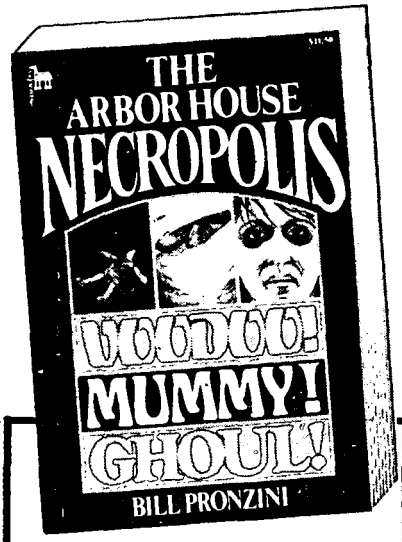

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pleased. I'll be happy to play for you."

There was no paper available but the hotel stationery. David ruled several sheets for piano score, pulled a chair up beside the piano bench and nodded to Rosetta.

"Okay, ready."

Elwood and I just watched and listened. It was still unmistakably Bach; we couldn't see how anyone else could have written it. David made rapid notations, stopped Rosetta every two or three bars. At one particular point, Rosetta halted to remark.

"This version is simpler than Mr. Bach's. He has such large hands, you see, so he made it easier for me. But as long as you're writing it down, let me show you *his* way."

"Yes. Yes." David Ventre was no longer bewildered but excited.

"Then there's Mr. Liszt's version. He plays everybody's work, since he's the most wonderful player, but he adds things of his own."

She began again, showing Dave a chord, then letting him play it. So it went, Dave notating feverishly, playing each complicated phrase over a few times to study the shape. A new, fuller piece of much greater complexity began to emerge, Dave yelping with delight as a particularly wondrous progression cascaded from the keyboard.

"Yes! Damn it, yes! You can *hear* it."

I heard it — and what can I say? Except that my instinct here is surer than my knowledge. Rosetta Hansen is a small plump woman with tiny hands and short fleshy fingers. Bach's hands were huge, his left-hand facility quite equal to the right. This is rare even among the best pianists. All of Bach's keyboard music makes great demands on a player's left hand.

This final version of *Sergeant Pepper Variations*, transcribed by David Ventre from Rosetta's demonstration, had enormous left-hand intervals — twelfths and larger — that Rosetta couldn't begin to negotiate. The benchmark was unmistakable to the ear. And if she couldn't write it down, how did she retain it?

Elwood and I just sat, able only to listen, and I remember wondering, when I could tear my mind from the music, at the liner notes someone would write, and who they could get to do them.

The music spun out under David's fingers, suffusing us in its power, and thought became irrelevant. Wherever created, the music was real.

I leaned back in my seat, reverent. Elwood was smiling now, a rictus that gradually widened to a grin of delight as he thought of cover art, someone like Harris Goldsmith — why not? — to do the liner notes, and how you design a record jacket to do justice to the large or small miracle inside.

And the white cat, reappearing from nowhere, jumped onto my lap, decided I was Good Folks, and settled down for a long stay.

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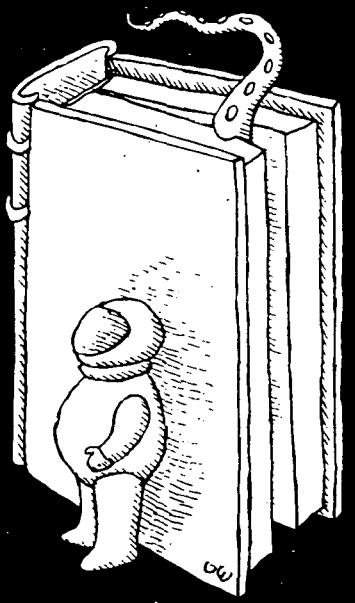
Books

JOHN CLUTE



Stephen Goldin, *A World Called Solitude*, Doubleday, 1981, $9.95.

Nicholas Yermakov, *Journey from Flesh*, Berkley Books, 1981, $2.25.

Paul Preuss, *Re-entry*, Bantam Books, 1981, $2.25.

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Harmony Books, 1980 (UK 1979), $6.95.

Orson Scott Card, *Unaccompanied Sonata and Other Stories*, The Dial Press, 1981, $10.95.

Gene Wolfe, *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, Doubleday, 1981, $9.95.

By 1970 it was no longer possible. Suddenly there was too much to read. Before that point, somewhere in the United States of America, someone or other was managing to keep up with everything everyone was publishing in science fiction or fantasy, and the knowledge that he or she (probably he back then) was out there keeping an eagle eye on all the big names and all the strays was oddly reassuring to at least some of the rest of us, because we knew that a genre still small enough to read was a genre small enough to understand. Somehow you couldn't be snuck up on from behind.

Now there's no one to defend our rear. A genre too big to read is a genre you can't see the boundaries of. As readers and writers and editors and reviewers we become at last classic victims of the dehumanizing scale of the Twentieth Century. Ultimately there's no *we* left at all. And in the new envi-

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ronment of media packaging that treats fans as consumers (another Twentieth Century process we seemed immune from, maybe because we were very small), it's become increasingly difficult to get the feel of new books, which more and more take on the aspect of products assembled for consumption. What certainly sounds original and from-the-heart in the first novel of (say) Nicholas Yermakov, author of several urgent, hilarious, astringent stories for this magazine, may or may not turn out all but indistinguishable from other products put together to fill the space-opera marketing slot. Orson Scott Card may be exploring harsh catechisms of private pain, or maybe he's a merchant. Who knows? Who can tell the dark night of the soul from dark-night-of-the-soul style? And who is Stephen Goldin when he's not a Doc Smith plant?

Stephen Goldin can be described as the author of *A World Called Solitude*, which he dedicates to his wife, so that he may actually mean it all, and which reads rather like late-early-middle Robert Silverberg stuck in molasses. Though by no means sharp-witted, *A World Called Solitude* earnestly and at times charmingly combines Silverbergian Weltschmerz (neurotic solitary urban scientist who has invented faster-than-light travel and has been framed by his government while at the same time failing his wife sexually and in other ways escapes crashed prison ship, sets up life alone and morosely self-pitying on a deserted planet full of magic technology) and Doc Smith epic (years later, nubile girl soldier crashes on same planet while fleeing vile aliens who are making undeclared war on human space, tries to shake hero out of his fugue so he can save humanity), but never cashes in on the ironies churned up in this melange. When Birk the anti-hero says he's still afraid of being treated as a criminal back on Earth, the warrior lady tells him that, on the contrary, he's gonna end up in clover. Howzat? quizzes the bemused neurotic Birk. Well:

> 'Just look at it. The Commonwealth is at war with these aliens. You captured one of their officers alive. You invented a machine that jams their ships. You discovered an entire planet filled with exotic weapons and new technology. I don't think any single person could make a bigger contribution to the war effort.'

So finally Birk is convinced, because he had never thought of it this way before. The rest of us, who had certainly thought of it this way before, like from maybe page three, may be excused from wondering whether *A World of Solitude* is an honest though slightly dumb novel about the salvation in human terms of a hyperventilating Silverbergian soul far from New York, or perhaps just *Fantasy Island*. Take your pick. If I had to, I'd plump for sincerity, slightly stewed.

Now about Nicholas Yermakov. *Journey from Flesh* gives off a compe-

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tent post-Delany tang in its opening scenes, which (after a teaser prolog) establish paramed rated phase shift navigator Alan Dreyfus on a spree in Port City on a blah planet where he meets a pack of 1960s-style "bohemians" in a bar, and also an ex-mercenary, once in the service of the dread musclebound Shahin and now seemingly addicted to a vampire lizard whose bite seems to grant him paranormal empathy to such a degree that he can (or maybe it's the lizard who can) *tell the truth* about anyone, down to the last soul-baring detail, for a fee. Thinking it's a scam, Dreyfus dares him to go ahead, at which point (we have reached page eleven) Nicholas Yermakov came to what I'd guess was a crisis decision nexus. Should he take on the task of actually presenting some of the truths Dreyfus is going to be saddled with, thus making some novelistic attempt at rendering *something* of the baroque inscapes of the human enterprise centuries hence and light-years gone, or should he stop giving us hints that he's writing an actual novel and get on with the *job*. Read on:

> A brutal encounter. Alan Dreyfus stripped and flayed. John (the mercenary) laughed, he smiled, he charmed and told me things about myself that were so deeply buried that my conscious mind had never thought to resurrect them.

End of novel. Beginning of job. After this shameless flapdoodle we learn absolutely nothing about Dreyfus of any interest beyond what Doc Smith could have told anyone in his sleep. What remains is space opera, subtly dishonored by pretense. The lizards are of course a valiant dying species on Viet-Nam-like Xerxes Something Or Other exploited by the arrogant merciless Shahin for the juice or whatever it is that turns men into heldentenors I mean Shahin; once bitten himself by a lizard, Dreyfus begins to see the light and, helped by the Navy and the "bohemians" and Viet-Nam-sergeant-like Creed Steiger, he saves Xerxes, though only with the additional help of — but that would give the story away. It's all rather a shame. With his title taken from a poem by Theodore Roethke, with his dedication made not only to personal friends but to public friends Norman Spinrad *and* Harlan Ellison as well, with long extracts from Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner* acutely uncomfortable in their new setting, and with a numbing Afterword in which the author tells us carefully (in better prose than his novel) how the book I think he never wrote got thought up (but not how he never wrote it), a good writer thoroughly lost has betrayed both himself and the beginnings of some good ideas; he is visibly the wrong emcee for this potted package tour of the space opera market.

Paul Preuss may or may not have less talent than Nicholas Yermakov, but does fit himself with pleasing and appropriate anonymity into the job of

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telling his polished barmy traditional tale of time and space travel, which ends (as usual) in Gordian knots *I* had no sword for. Like all true hard sf, *Re-entry* is a novel which is what it means to be — glossy, technophilic, ornate, savvy about the frontiers of knowledge, power-obsessed in the name of hardnosed realism, great on carapace, vacuous on the inner depths. But cyborg-android computer-assisted telepathic confabs and the kinetic interaction between Man and bronco black holes aside, the main thing about a hard sf novel is that, whatever it's about, it doesn't take the micky out of it. True to form, *Re-entry* copes unsmilingly with a tale too convoluted to more than hint at. A man wishes to change his lifestyle by going back in time through a black hole in a spaceship and tutoring himself on a primitive planet rather like Australia, and does. The oldest wisest woman in the universe has a watching brief and lends a helping hand (it gets complicated here). A corrupt dictator is tied in pretzels (or isn't). A planet-wide experiment in evolution is seriously toxified by all of the above. There are spaceships out of *Star Wars* and characters whose actions have a high albedo but whose hearts are as illegible (or empty) as the space between the stars in Hollywood. It's all a lot of fun. Brand merchandise. Which means that you do get what you pay for.

* * *

I don't think anyone could pretend that Douglas Adams' *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which novelizes part of his extraordinarily successful BBC radio series of the same name, ever amounted to much more than a job of media transplant for its author who, having once already told the jokes and the story they engendered, was very likely, at the point he wrote the novel, also preparing to run the whole package through yet another transformation — into a television series, also successful. But whatever form this blatant package comes in, it's a joy.

To begin with, *Hitchhiker* is indeed a novel about how to travel free around the galaxy; somewhere in between it is a cosmological fable about the construction of our Earth as a gigantic living computer designed to solve the riddle of existence (all costs covered by the creatures who had us built and who manifest themselves in the shape of white mice so they can watch us experiment); but it all ends before anything is properly resolved because there is a sequel, *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe*, episodes of which appear earlier in the radio and tv versions than they do in print, which is sometimes confusing. But no thumb-waving at the actual flow of story can do much more than deflate the underlying jokes which clearly structure the sometimes slightly pixy moves of the tale. If we hear that Earth is about to be demolished to make way

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for an interstellar turnpike, then sooner or later Earth *will* be demolished, and all her citizenry die, with the exception of some white mice, and the heroes, who are hitchhiking. Significantly, Adams did some script work for *Monty Python's Travelling Circus*, the famous 1960s British tv revue, where similar deadpan leaps shaped many of the best sketches.

Given its music-hall premises, the tone of *Hitchhiker* is sometimes damagingly sophomoric, and there is a constant taint of collegiate wit in the naming of silly names and the descriptions of silly alcoholic beverages; and the smooth finger-licking cynicism of the book does sometimes remind one of Kurt Vonnegut's lesser moments. But so it goes. There is enough joy throughout, enough tooth to the zaniness, and enough rude knowingness about media-hype versions of science fiction, to make *Hitchhiker* one of the genre's rare genuinely funny books.

We come to a star writer of the new age when stranger beds with stranger. We do not know whether to laugh or cry. Neither does Orson Scott Card, maybe. At the heart of all his work to date a compulsive cold technical polish unflaggingly exposes to view some of the oddest mortal coils the genre has yet presented to its readership, but I for one have never been able to tell if the innards he formaldehydes are gut or plasteel. This drive of his to the interior nerve — which sometimes reads like a grenade held to the stomach — *seems* to sound authentic all right, but only sometimes; there is a pervading lack of gearedness between text and reader, which may in part be due to problems of focus engendered by that expanded commercialized horizonless genre we've been moaning about for the last couple of thousand words.

It's certainly the case that Card's effect, when tested by comparison with earlier writers in the genre, can seem mannered, decadent, *villainous;* and he can read like a professional spelunker only pretending to take risks in the blood caverns of the invaded heart. This is clearest in some of the stories in *Unaccompanied Sonata* which are old genre fancies reclothed; "Mortal Gods," for instance, takes the idea that there is an elevated poignance in being human and mortal in a universe of longlifers for whom death is a mystery and who worship our transience, and so manipulates the pathos of the tale that the reader tends to finish the story feeling rather like Queen for a Day: consumed. So the reader may feel a certain suspicion, and, on coming across more original-seeming work, may feel once-bitten about following Card's lead into the theme-park Deep. Take "Kingsmeat," which reads like a toboggan ride downwards into late Twentieth Century paradigm country, where the knives are out. On a conquered human colony planet, anthropophagous alien rulers in a magic castle demand living flesh of their victims;

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to do their bidding, a human Shepherd strides through the Disney village full of captives, selecting limbs and breasts and organs for the repast, calming the donors with his magic wand. Suddenly the planet is liberated, and he is put on trial. Though the colonists come to recognize that he has been playing Shepherd to prevent a massacre of all human stock, they refuse to let him free; if he has played God, then like so many gods he must be put in bondage and gradually eviscerated, though kept alive to watch his people smile. So. Does the story work as allegory, as a kind of dream of Duty General Douglas MacArthur might have had in 1951, or does it evoke more powerfully that abyssal aimless pornotopic cruelty endemic to much of the art of today (for we are in a time of troubles) and whose literary roots (one supposes) are in texts like *Story of O*? Other stories in the book, like the well-known "Ender's Game" and "Unaccompanied Sonata" itself, likewise chill the mind until it is too numb for catharsis. In the end, glitter blinds, and Card abandons us there, in the dark.

After years of solid productive work Gene Wolfe has suddenly become a very prominent writer indeed (about time) and very marketable (but he's a grown man). All the same, it's hard not to cavil about the title of his latest collection, *Gene Wolfe's Book of Days*, and the procrustean hype generated by the notion it presents that eighteen previously autonomous stories can usefully be brought together to illustrate a chronology of Days like Valentine's Day and Mother's Day and Thanksgiving and so on. Appended to work of the complexity Wolfe demonstrates here, these labels, like stool pigeons, tell versions of their tales only a cop would believe, though maybe a kind of sly irony is being offered here, because if there's one thing Wolfe's work is not, it's simpleminded.

Certainly some of the stories in this volume seem garish and one-dimensional when associated with deeply worked achievements like "Forlesen" and "Three Million Square Miles." "How I Lost the Second World War...", for instance, or "Of Relays and Roses," are both pretty much what they seem to be: gimcrack genre notions stretched out to cope with some magazine or other's routine space requirements. Wolfe, when he's being as straightforward as he's capable of, is at best competent, and indeed his virtues tend to turn a little sour. Indirection can become misdirection; richness of language and thematic multivalency can so overload simple narrative resolutions that the reader ends the story with the thought that maybe a final page is missing, because his eyes have been opened too wide.

Fortunately, Wolfe very rarely tries what one might call stoolpigeon stories — stories you can papaphrase and catch the truth of. When he bears

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down, because of his superb control over and enrichment of the organon of generic material one might have thought already done to death, he reminds me just a little — I'm afraid this is going to sound pretty pretentious — of Johann Sebastian Bach. The central fact about Bach is *not* his originality (for he was not very original) but his immense comprehensive grasp of the given. As Bach synthesized the Baroque, so Gene Wolfe seems to be attempting to synthesize true stories out of the growing incoherence of our genre.

It is not the notes of a fugue but their echoes which give it meaning. Clearly inclined to irony and parody, both techniques which of course require an already existing Matter to work upon and draw echoes out of, Gene Wolfe has for years been quietly but implacably re-naturing the shibboleth- and gizmo-ridden deep structures of our genre, bringing out the internal human circumstances that always motored our flights to Mars, however tenuously they were dealt with by overworked "hack" writers trying to feed themselves at a cent a word. At the heart of his best stories (it is the actual subject matter of the astonishing "Forlesen") lies a remarkable capacity to create adequate breathing models of the experience of moving from childhood to adulthood, from adulthood to old age; in these stories a deeply attuned vision of the rhythms and outcomes of the life-conversation between child and family, adult and world, gives meaning to both "sides," tells us ultimately that maybe there are no real "sides" in the conversations we all have with the voices of those near to use and with the prison of the world whose depiction in science fiction terms is at the same time hilarious and minatory in Wolfe's hands; no sides perhaps, but certainly walls.

Wolfe is clearly avid for meaning; he clearly longs to make the world *mean* something human. But unlike too many contemporary writers in the field — for whom the search for meaning is for a door in the wall through which readers can be piped for a price — Wolfe tells us again and again that understanding is going to have to be its own reward. That there is no other prize. That there is no one to give us a prize for knowing that we have been alive. After a lifetime which has passed with the passing of a single day, Forlesen has a question to ask the undertaker who has magically appeared.

> 'I want to know if it's meant anything,' Forlesen said. 'if what I suffered — if it's been worth it.'
>
> 'No,' the little man said. 'Yes. No. Yes. Yes. No. Yes. Yes. Maybe.'

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For some solid, off-earth science fiction, like this story about interstellar ambassador Jerol Telrig and his battle with the beasts of the planet Sylvanne, who better to turn to than the esteemed editor of Analog, *Stanley Schmidt.*

Mascots

BY

STANLEY SCHMIDT

The beast did not belong here.

That was the baldest possible statement of the intellectual part of Ambassador Jerol Telrig's reaction on seeing it. Emotionally, it took a while even to register.

It was that far from belonging.

Telrig blinked and looked again. It was still there. Except for it, he was alone, by choice and with the cooperation (perhaps too willing?) of the planetary government. Around him stretched the spacious boulevards and plantings and fountains and buildings of Boskavel, the capital. The local sun shone warmly overhead; he no longer noticed its slight excess of orange. In all, a picture of tranquility so complete as to be, on reflection, subtly disturbing to one with his mission.

Except for the beast.

It had appeared from behind a building, padding softly on six heavily clawed feet. It was the size of a large dog; big overlapping plates covering its body gave it a vaguely reptiloid aspect. But its eyes burned with a brightness more mammal-like than reptilian, and the rest of its head was, with only slight exaggeration, all teeth.

Conceivably — an interstellar ambassador learns to expect surprises on any new world — it was some sort of pet. Nevertheless, Telrig's hand crept to his hidden lasergun — just in case — and he felt the effects of adrenalin slipping into his blood.

Standing very still, he looked around. Where was the beast's owner? (And who would want such a thing?)

From a flower-lined walk in the parklet across the boulevard appeared a girl. Fifteen standard years old, Telrig guessed. Petite, with freckles and turned-up nose and sleek auburn hair that flashed in the sunlight. She walked

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easily, in a colorful shift that rippled around her as she moved, relaxed and carefree.

And alone.

The beast saw her and turned slightly, loping across the boulevard in her direction. She saw it and froze in her tracks, staring. It seemed to Telrig that she should scream, but she didn't. Maybe she was too scared. She said something in the lilting tongue of Sylvanne; with an effort, Telrig translated her words as, "Don't come any closer. Please."

She was afraid, all right — as well she might be. If the beast attacked, she wouldn't have a chance.

Slowly, Telrig drew the lasergun from its pocket. The beast had stopped in the middle of the boulevard, its gaze fixed on the defenseless girl. Its breathing grew heavier, a rhythmic panting that made its plates slide over each other with a faint scraping noise.

He looked back at the girl. Why didn't she run?

Motion blurred at the edge of his vision. The beast had become a streak, aimed at the girl, almost too fast to follow, accompanied by a hissing bellow and a pungent smell. Almost before Telrig realized what was happening, it was on her. She screamed, finally, as it tore at her shift and her body. Telrig saw blood....

He swore at himself for waiting so long. Now, as they struggled, he risked hitting the wrong one if he fired.

But if he did nothing, her death was certain. Struggling to hold the aimbeam on the beast, he pressed the guarded stud. The supercapacitors in the unit released their charge with an audible *crack*, and a general flash of peripheral light accompanied the transient laser bolt.

But it hit — the right one. The beast did not die at once but stopped in the middle of a motion as if puzzled. Then, with a bellow of renewed intensity, it began tearing at the girl again. Telrig, swearing, forced himself to wait for the ready light to tell him the capacitors were recharged.

But before that happened, the bellow faded. The beast's motions became slow and uncoordinated, letting the girl pull free.

The beast crumpled and lay still. Telrig warily held the lasergun on it, but it moved no more. "Are you all right?" he asked the girl.

She didn't answer. She was standing still, catching her breath, staring at Telrig with a strange, wide-eyed, wholly inappropriate expression.

"What's the matter?" he asked again. She didn't look too badly mauled, with the possible exception of her right arm....

Abruptly, her eyes darted left. Then she turned and ran off in the opposite direction.

"Wait!" Telrig called out. He took a couple of steps to follow but quickly realized that he was in no condition to keep up.

And also that whatever had scared

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her should concern him, too. Another beast? Belatedly, he spun in the direction of the glance that had set her off.

He saw nothing but a zebra-uniformed policeman. Relieved, though still confused, he deactivated his lasergun and started to put it away.

But the policeman had his own out and was pointing it straight at Telrig. "Drop it!" the officer commanded. For an instant, Telrig was too stunned and disoriented to comply. But the officer flicked on his aimbeam, and its tiny spot of red light danced on Telrig's sash....

He dropped it. As the weapon fell to the pavement with a thud, Telrig spread his hands wide in a gesture of both surrender and helplessness.

"You're under arrest, sir," the peach-faced officer announced, scooping up the lasergun. "You'll have to come with me."

The cop had a car, a little transplastic bubble with two seats separated by a partition of the same material, that skimmed above the ground on quietly whirring motors. He did not have a warm conversational manner. When Telrig started to rant of diplomatic immunity and his indignation at not being told what was going on, the cop just said, "I'm not the one to discuss this with."

After which he remained so adamantly silent that Telrig gave up and sat back to wait.

Planet Center was a huge and bewildering maze of shining shapes, but he knew the government building they entered through a back door. He was led on foot past an office door he remembered from his arrival formalities. A long corridor, three flights of stairs that left him panting, and another long and tortuous corridor led them to another office, virtually indistinguishable from the first except that the door bore an unfamiliar name and a title which his sparse Sylvannese could not translate.

The officer left him in a locked waiting room for some five minutes. Then he re-emerged from the inner office, led Telrig in, and left.

Telrig found himself alone with an excessively amiable-looking bureaucrat — a big, swarthy man with a disarming smile that permeated his whole face and never seemed to leave, though occasionally it varied.

"Ah, Ambassador Telrig," he beamed from behind his big jadite desk. He spoke Anglarneg. "I'm pleased to meet you. Sorry the circumstances aren't more pleasant. I'm Rald Kalonne." He extended a hand.

Telrig ignored it. He settled into a chair without being asked. "You know me," he observed.

"Yes, of course," said Kalonne. "An ambassador from the Grand Republic of Larneg could hardly come to Sylvanne without her people taking notice."

Is that why she was staring at me

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like that? Telrig wondered, remembering the girl, right before she bolted. *No, I think not....* He said, "You even know me as an ambassador of the Grand Republic — yet I find myself under arrest. Look, I don't know what you think I did, but it doesn't matter. I claim diplomatic immunity."

A bit of amusement showed through Kalonne's officially apologetic smile. "Really, Mr. Telrig, we of the Sylvannese government do talk to each other. Minister Lazax made it quite clear to you on your arrival that we do not recognize diplomatic immunity."

"Barbaric," Telrig muttered. "How do you expect any favorable consideration when you don't honor one of the oldest customs of civilized nations?"

Kalonne laughed. "In the first place, Mr. Telrig, I believe Mr. Lazax also made it clear that we are not interested in your favorable consideration. We have no intention of joining your Republic. You're welcome to wander our planet like any other visitor, and free to use what you learn to try to change our minds. But with no special privileges. You have no more and no fewer rights than anyone else.

"In the second place, you're free to consider this barbaric, but we see it as quite the opposite. And if you want to represent your people among ours, it's your business to learn our ways. I'm as sorry as you that you failed to do so."

Telrig fumed silently for half a minute. "So what is it you think I've done?"

"What do *you* think happened out there, Mr. Telrig?"

Telrig drew breath sharply. "I thought it was quite simple. I saved a girl's life. That beast attacked her and I killed it before it killed her. I expected nothing in return — though a 'thank you' might have been in order." He leaned forward. "What was a thing like that doing in the capital, anyway. What was it?"

"It lived here," said Kalonne. "It was a mascot."

"A *what?*"

"A mascot. They have no other name now, though I suspect they were called something quite different in colonial days. They're a species of native predator — about the only kind still around, and there aren't many. But we're proud of the ones we have — and they're very protected."

Telrig leaned back, frowning. "I see. So I'm charged with killing a protected animal."

"With a weapon."

"That makes a difference?"

"A vast difference. Had you killed it with your hands, there would be far less problem — though you'd probably still be guilty of interference."

The glimmer of incipient understanding dissipated abruptly. "Maybe you'd better back up. Protected animals I can understand. But out on the street? A zoo's the place for something like that. It's safer and people are safer. And what difference does it make *how* I kill it?"

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Kalonne smiled. "Yes, I guess I had better back up. I tend to forget how many civilizations have forgotten — or never learned." For a moment, his eyes seemed lost in reflection. Then he said, "We're a successful world, Mr. Telrig. The planet itself was kind, mostly. That, plus good technology, let the original colony progress smoothly and quickly to high civilization. Our indigenous arts were in considerable demand, off-planet as well as on. Nobody had to struggle to eat. Life was comfortable and pleasant, and that did *not* mean stagnation of the kinds predicted by two-bit philosophers. Our ancestors had good minds, and they were productive.

"But they were far removed from basics. When a barrage of natural disasters crippled their technology, a lot of people died. Things had to be rebuilt rather thoroughly after the Collapse, and though some of the old buildings still stand, we think of what you see around you as the Second Civilization."

"All very interesting," Telrig lied impatiently, "but what does it have to do with me?"

"I'm coming to that."

"A lot of people died, you say. Was this an epidemic?"

"Epidemics were just a small part of it. There were weather anomalies, seismic disturbances, and so on, in such rapid succession that we couldn't recover from one before the next one hit. There may have been connections, but we haven't unraveled them. What matters is the net effect on civilization. It was like a fast series of hard blows to your body. They crippled production here and distribution there and communication in between, and a failure one place led to three more somewhere else. Soon the whole network of production and distribution was so ripped and snarled that nobody could depend on it. People were thrown on their own, forced to spread out from the cities and fend for themselves. A lot of them didn't know how, or weren't in shape, or both. The country wasn't tame in those days. Predators were still fairly common, and they spread gradually back into the cities.

"When it was all over, the survivors were those who *had* been in good enough shape and adaptable enough to take care of themselves. There weren't enough of them to rebuild civilization as fast as they'd like — and when they rebuilt it, they didn't want to build such vulnerability back into it. Hence the mascots."

He paused. Telrig mulled. "I'm not sure I understand."

"Think, Mr. Telrig. A vast, interlocking technology to make life easy is a wonderful thing — but given that, what incentive does an individual have to maintain the personal resources he'd need if the technology suffered a lapse? Games? Gymnasium classes? Self-delusion, Mr. Telrig. Players can lose games they're not interested in winning. Doing poorly in school is hardly

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a life-and-death matter.

"What was needed, the Survivors reasoned, was a *real* danger that anyone might have to face. In some societies, dissatisfied individuals have in effect served as predators to provide such a danger, but we've worked hard to avoid that. We *don't* want to pit human beings against each other. What the Survivors did, as they rebuilt, was to make sure some of the planet's predators were allowed to survive and freely roam all regions — including the cities."

"You mean," said Telrig, "you *encourage* those things? Knowing they may kill people?"

"Exactly. The mascots are ideal for the job, Mr. Telrig. They're reptile-like; they don't eat often; they spend a lot of time dormant. Usually they're no threat, but you never know when one will turn up. When it does, it's likely to be hungry, and if it is, it'll give you a real challenge. But not insurmountable. Sometimes they can be evaded by wit, and there are vulnerable spots under the edges of the plates on the neck. A strong, alert person can kill one by hand. No one *would*, unless attacked, but in that case it's a reasonable and honorable thing to do."

"And yet you do lose people?"

"A few."

"How many?"

"Oh, ten or twenty a year in the capital. A few more elsewhere."

Telrig was silent for a while, trying to accept the fact that this could happen on a world that was, superficially, so civilized. Finally he asked sullenly, "How was I to know about a screwball custom like that?"

"You came," said Kalonne. "It was your business to find out."

"Oh." Thoughts flipped through Telrig's brain, examined briefly and discarded — schemes for calling for help from the Republic, all futile for reasons of time, space, opportunity, and political expediency. "So what do you propose to do to me?"

Kalonne pursed his lips. "The offense is truly serious, Mr. Telrig. The normal penalties seem unduly harsh for you. We're willing to make allowances for your ignorance — once — but we can't pretend nothing happened. I think the best thing is just to let you go back to what you were doing."

"*What?*"

"*Without* that nasty little weapon Officer Brekkl took from you."

Telrig's first reaction was indignation, together with more than a touch of fear at the prospect of going back to his survey, unarmed, with the constant threat of a "mascot" attack hanging over his head. Since the Sylvannese government had already decided not to join the Republic, might it not arrange that the probability of an encounter be a bit higher in his case?

He almost burst out with an unprofessional tirade against the barbarians and a sarcastic question about why they didn't just deport him instead. But the answer to that was too obvious —

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and he suddenly remembered something else. Something back in his room.

The fear — most of it, anyway — went away. The indignation, the anger, and the contempt for a "civilization" that did such things — those all remained.

He hardly heard the rest of what Kalonne said. He was still fuming when he was finally permitted to leave the office, walking as fast as he could and thinking only of the extra lasergun hidden in the bottom of his suitcase.

In his haste, he didn't even see the girl standing outside the door. But her voice calling out his name made him stop in midstride and look back, frowning.

The frown deepened when he saw who she was. She had changed into a yellow culotte suit and her right arm was bandaged, but there was no doubt about her identity. "You!" Telrig said. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi," she said with an odd smile. She was speaking Anglarneg now, though lightly flavored with Sylvannese. "I had to talk to you. I thought they'd bring you here."

"Your timing's uncanny," he said sourly. "Why did you run off like that?"

"I was scared." She gestured at the hall. "Don't let me hold you up. You go on as you were, and I'll walk along." He started off, slower than before, and she fell in beside him, her heels clicking lightly on the floor. "I was scared because the officer was there and you'd just killed my mascot. I'd never heard of anybody doing such a thing and I didn't know what to make of it. I didn't know what *he'd* make of it, but I was afraid he might somehow blame me. And, of course, I was angry."

"Angry?"

"At you. For taking mine." She stopped and looked at him. "You don't understand much of this, do you?"

"No." He didn't stop. So after a very brief pause, she caught up with him again. "What was I *supposed* to do, damn it? Let that monster kill you?"

"Yes. Only it wouldn't have, with any luck. Didn't Kalonne explain?"

"He tried. I think." They came to a door and Telrig hesitated, looking out through the glass at the shining buildings and gardens. There were more mascots out there, and he was unarmed. But theoretically they weren't common, and he was not likely to meet another before he got to his suitcase.

And he really had no choice.

He glanced around to get his bearings, then stepped out into the fresh air and started briskly toward his hotel. The girl followed.

"That's what I was afraid of," she said. "I realized while I was getting cleaned up and bandaged that I couldn't be blamed for what happened. But you would be, and I figured you must not

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understand our ways. I felt like I owed you a good word if you were really in bad trouble, but since you came out I guess you didn't need that. But I still feel like I should try to explain, if Kalonne didn't do a good job."

He turned warily down a side street that was narrower than he liked. "When do you start?"

For an instant she looked startled and hurt. Then she giggled. "I thought I already had. OK, you keep me on my good behavior. I guess he told you why we have mascots."

"More or less. What I don't understand is why you people put up with it. Why don't you go after the beasts with weapons and wipe them out, once and for all?"

"What kind of place do you come from, mister?" she almost whispered, her face full of what looked like shock. "It's the law, for one thing — and honor, for a more important one. Some people go through life without ever having the chance to prove...." She bit her lip. "I had mine, and you took it. Don't think that's easy to take. But I said I'd try to understand, and help you understand, and I'll stick to that. It's going to be a big job, though." Abruptly, the hurt and anger vanished and a warm smile suffused her freckled features. "Friends?"

They had almost reached his hotel, and he paused to study that face, trying to fathom what was behind it and what he was getting into. "Maybe," he said — and he smiled, too, though it took some effort. "Look, I have to go back to my hotel now. Maybe I'll see you again sometime and maybe I won't. But I have to ask you one thing. Do you really believe you could have saved yourself without my help?"

"I'd certainly hope so," she said. "I *should* be able to. It's not that hard; I can teach you. But now I can't *know*. Oh, don't worry. I don't blame you. You didn't know."

He looked at her for a long time. She really believed it, it seemed — but he couldn't. She was just a little girl. Soon, no doubt, she would be a very capable woman, but she was by no means equipped now to deal with that beast by herself. What she thought was well-founded confidence was merely the brashness of adolescence, and likely to get her into very serious trouble.

That realization made him feel suddenly protective toward her. "Look," he said quietly, "you be careful, will you?" She nodded. "I have to go now." He started for the hotel.

"Hey," she called after him. "I thought you wanted to learn about Sylvanne."

He stopped again, exasperated. "What?"

"I know why you're here. You need to know what this world is really like, right? Well, you don't really expect to learn that living in a hotel and hanging around with politicians and diplomats, do you?"

"I suppose you have a better idea?"

"Sure. Come home with me. I can

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show you things *they* never would and introduce you to some real people. And save you a hotel bill in the bargain."

Telrig hesitated. It sounded like exactly what he needed — the first part of it, anyway — though he could hardly imagine a less likely source of it. The last part of her offer sounded at best, questionable. "Won't your parents mind?"

"Of course not. Well, are you coming?"

"I don't even know your name."

"Patya."

He hesitated several seconds more and then said, "Wait here." All the way to his room, he marveled at his letting himself be talked into something like this. It would be bad enough if the deal was just what it appeared to be. It would be far worse if it was a trap, a part of a plot to foil his ambitions for Sylvanne.

And that possibility could not be dismissed lightly.

He did not check out of the hotel. His name's continued presence on the register would provide at least a surface respectability that he might well need later.

He almost dug the extra lasergun out of his suitcase and stuck it in his pocket, as he had planned. Then, for some reason which he couldn't explain even to himself, he put it back, locked the suitcase, and carried it down to meet Patya.

She lived in a tiny cottage, not far from Planet Center, but far enough that they rode a public shuttle partway. It was the first Telrig had ridden here, and the first anywhere in many years. It only carried five other passengers, but he kept feeling that they were all staring at him — which might or might not have been true. Patya must have noticed, for when they got off, she laughed and said, "I have some old glasses you can wear. Just window glass — stage props — but they'll make you look different. C'mon, it's right down here."

The cottage was tucked in between two much larger buildings. It now stood mostly in shadow, but a stray shaft of light found a strip of flowers across the front of the small, grassy dooryard, and there were more flowers in boxes in the two front windows. Even after allowing for its being dwarfed by its neighbors, the whole house seemed much too small for a whole family.

They went in. A narrow vestibule led straight back to a wall, with a window overlooking a small courtyard. Next to that was a closet-like bathroom. Telrig saw nothing else except a single large door opening off each side of the vestibule. "This is all? I don't understand. You said your parents—"

Patya laughed. "I said they wouldn't mind. Why should they? They don't live here."

He drew away from her, startled and alarmed. "You live alone?" She nodded. "What happened? Did you run away from home?"

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Again she laughed. "That's silly, Mr. Telrig. How can you talk about taking us under your imperial wing when you're that far from understanding us? No, I didn't run away. I showed that I could take care of myself, that's all. So I got my own place — with their blessing. They're actually rather proud of me." She opened the door on the left, accordion-style, to reveal a small but tidy parlor with a couch and some crowded book-and-tape shelves. She went in and sprawled casually on the couch.

Telrig hung back. "Would they still be proud of you if I stayed here?"

"Of course. Hey, come on in, will you? Just put your suitcase down and make yourself at home." She patted the couch. "Let's talk."

He still didn't feel comfortable, but he did as she asked. He sat as far from here as he could, but the couch was small and that wasn't very far. "That's better," she said. "Relax. I'd offer you something to eat or drink, but I don't have a lot. Don't worry, though. I'll fix you a good supper. Simple but nice."

He looked at her, studying her sprightly face more closely than he had had time to before. Her last words seemed to fit her too well. She was so little, so trusting, so defenseless.

Or was she?

Part of him believed she was, despite the warnings of the experienced diplomat in him that she might not be. "Aren't you afraid?" he asked.

"Afraid?"

"Of me." He felt vaguely annoyed that she had to ask. "A lot of men would take advantage of this situation. How do you know I'm not one of them?"

"Does everybody worry that much where you come from? Poor Mr. Telrig."

"Poor Patya," he mimicked. "Look, you're a nice girl. I like you. But I worry about you. Don't you have any idea what could happen to you, doing things like this? I could be a different kind of man than I am. I'm not, but you don't know me well enough to count on that. Inviting me home, giving me the run of your house with no safeguards—"

For the first time, a bit of distance appeared in her voice and face. "Oh, I wouldn't say *that*, Mr. Telrig. You saw the doors. You're sleeping behind this one, and I'm sleeping behind that one. If you tried to cross over to do anything you shouldn't, you'd very soon decide it was a mistake." The warm, impish smile returned abruptly. "But since you're *not* that kind of man, we'll never really know, and there's no need to talk about it. Right?"

"Right." Telrig found himself a little relieved at the clearly defined role of the doors — and increasingly mystified by Patya. He would stay; his hunches said she might indeed shed more light on the larger mysteries of Sylvanne.

But part of him still worried that she was a trap.

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She did not act like a trap. She passed the afternoon in conversation based on seemingly innocent curiosity about the Grand Republic and a seemingly sincere desire to share a youthful enthusiasm for her home world — despite, Telrig noted, the way it had just today almost killed her. She did teach him more than Kalonne about the vulnerabilities of mascots. Telrig had no way of knowing whether the information was true — and he hoped never to find out — but he listened closely all the same.

As he watched the sunset reflected in tall glassy buildings, Patya fixed dinner in the room across the hall, which served her as both bedroom and kitchen. An hour of smells suggested she was a good cook; one taste confirmed it. They turned in early, she in her bed, he on the converted couch, and he lay awake a long time, trying unsuccessfully to sort out what was happening.

In the morning she took him out, duly outfitted with the "disguise" glasses she had promised. He rummaged through his suitcase before they left, digging out a fresh multiholo cube for the camera he carried on such assignments. Again he hesitated over the thing in the bottom, and again he left it there. It was not rational, he warned himself, but he did it anyway. The probability of another encounter was small — and he sensed that Patya would be hurt if she found out he was carrying it.

Should that matter?

Whether it should or not, it did.

Again they rode shuttles, and a boat on a bronzed-blue lake, and they strolled tiny streets he would never have entered alone and drank local beverages with people who seemingly neither knew nor cared who he was. She teased him about the number of pictures, calling him, "A tourist *par excellence*."

"Not at all," he retorted. "It's my job. I'm not a spy, you understand; I'm not poking into anything hidden. But I do have to take back all I can, and that includes pictures. Confidentially, I don't even *like* taking pictures."

"Oh." She giggled.

They ate out that evening, in a cheap little place where Patya insisted on treating. After fighting down his initial prejudice, Telrig had to admit that the food wasn't bad.

That night he lay awake not nearly so long as the first, and when he slept, he slept well.

The following days brought more outings, more pictures, and no real incidents. He learned virtually nothing of tangible value to his mission, and yet he felt that he was collecting data which someday soon he would integrate into a comprehensive understanding of Sylvanne. That, he told himself on those occasions when he thought consciously about it, would be the key to absorbing this strange world into mutually beneficial membership in the Republic. Thus did he rationalize strolls in parks and swims in fountains

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and picnics with friends of Patya's (who introduced him as her uncle), and once even a birthday party in a pub hung with antique fishnets.

Threats of mascots and conspiracies receded toward the back of his mind. His days were interesting and his nights restful. One morning he woke first, and the thought came to him that he was beginning to view Patya much as the daughter he had never had — a precocious daughter, unpredictable and occasionally exasperating, but always bright and lovable in an entirely daughterly way. And as such she brought a quietly growing "glow" to her "father's" life.

Occasionally she tried to get him to do exercises so he would be prepared if he ever met a mascot, but he shrugged the suggestions off. He had seen a mascot; he couldn't believe that any unarmed human would really have a chance if attacked, regardless of training. So he continued to rely on the remoteness of the threat — and meanwhile tried not to think about it.

One day, starting out for an outdoor museum of industry and architecture, he forgot his camera. When Patya reminded him, he shrugged. "I can skip it one day. You know, Patya, you've made me feel almost like a real tourist. For once, I want to just walk around and enjoy and not be a recording machine."

"But tourists take pictures," said Patya.

"Not this one," said Telrig, and they went on without it — to one of the pleasantest days he could remember.

He didn't carry it the next day, either, or the next after that. Once or twice he worried that he was losing sight of his real reason for being here. Usually he could rationalize it away — but not always.

One afternoon they lay on a grassy hilltop overlooking the city, comparing the images they saw in clouds. "Jerol," she said (for though they agreed on the nature of their relationship, she did not like surnames or titles), "do you still want to bring Sylvanne into the Republic?"

"Yes." He wondered idly whether he still believed that.

"Why? Oh, I know what the Republic gets out of it — real estate, ideas, wealth, strategic location — but what would *we* get out of it?"

The question rocked him to his roots. He knew all the answers he had been coached to give — but suddenly they all seemed inadequate for Patya. Half-truths and slanted data were all parts of a diplomat's stock in trade and kit of tools. He had lived and worked with them for his whole adult life. But he could not give them to her, and he was dismayed to realize how little else he had to offer.

That same evening, a beeping from his suitcase told him that headquarters wanted to talk to him on the tachyo. He half hoped the beeping would stop before he got to it, but it didn't. "So

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you're still alive," his chief muttered, with a sardonic edge to his voice that cut right through interstellar static. "You haven't checked in with us for quite a while, Telrig. You haven't answered your hotel phone. Is something wrong?"

"No," said Telrig, annoyed at the Chief's intrusion. "Nothing's wrong."

"No? Then I can expect you back soon, with a final report?"

"Maybe?"

"Maybe?" If a voice could raise eyebrows, the Chief's did, even over the tachyo. "You'd better explain, Telrig. You've been there a long time. Is it time for us to move in, or isn't it?"

"I'm ... not sure. I've been doing more research, Chief. That's why I haven't been at the hotel. I've been ... moving around." He hoped Patya wouldn't burst in in her usual ebullient fashion.

The Chief was silent for a while. "You're hiding something, Telrig. First you tell me nothing's wrong; then you tell me you're doing extra 'research' because you don't know whether we can close this deal yet. Spill it — or do you have something going on the side?"

"No. No, it's not that. I'm not sure it's to the Republic's benefit to take in this place, now or ... I'm just not sure. I've discovered something — a subtle poison in the people, if you will — that I'm not sure we need. Or want."

"A poison? What are you talking about?"

The conversation dragged forth too-vivid memories of the day he'd seen the mascot tearing at Patya, and reawakened the revulsion he'd felt when Kalonne tried to explain. "There's a ... custom," he said. "I don't think I should talk about it. I have to learn more."

Another long pause. "OK. Two days, Telrig. That's enough - and I want results. You're hinting that you're going to ask us to believe Sylvanne is undesirable? Not after the reports you've already sent. Desirability is no longer the issue. We want a plan of action. Soon."

The Chief switched off with a distinct click. Telrig sat on the couch staring vacantly at the bookshelves and wondering what he was going to do. Patya came into the room — silently, for once, leaving him alone with his thoughts. He felt farther than ever from having either a clear enticement to draw Sylvanne into the fold or a solid way to make the Republic want to keep her out.

He was no longer even sure which he *wanted* to do.

He looked out of the corner of his eye at Patya, curled up on the couch with her freckled nose in a book. He thought anew of that plated beast raking blood from her, and shuddered.

Sylvanniverse, she'd been saying for days, was the most festive day in the Sylvannese calendar, and it was the

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next day. From the moment she met Telrig for breakfast, Patya bubbled with contagious enthusiasm for the hours to come. Sylvanniverse, she said, was everything the parts of its name suggested, all focused into one intense fling that was far more than a fling.

The morning and afternoon, at least, seemed to bear her out. The festival air so filled the city that they did not have to go far from home to get into the whirl. Whole boulevards were closed to traffic and taken over by a joyously seething mass of buyers and sellers of food, artists and musicians, dancers, inventors displaying their brainchildren, and much, much more. Several times Telrig thought that he was seeing so much today that he really ought to be holographing it — but he'd so lost the habit that his camera had lain untouched for days in Patya's house. He mentioned it once and she said, "Go back and get it. I'll wait."

"I'd never find you," he replied, shouting above the carnival noise. Neither of them mentioned it again. But by late afternoon his age was catching up with him. He felt tired and overwhelmed by the sensory impressions flooding him from all sides.

That Patya sensed without his saying anything. "Tired?" she asked.

"Afraid so," he admitted. "I'm not as young as you, Patya."

"Let's go home for a while. I'll fix a quiet dinner and we can get a little rest and come back. The night part's best."

"Night?"

"Sure. Lights ... fireworks ... music ... more than I can describe. C'mon."

The approach to silence as they moved away from the crowds was like a soothing balm. Finally the noises disappeared almost entirely as Patya shut the door behind them. Telrig sank with relief into the sofa, closing his eyes and letting her fill his nostrils with food smells — warm, homey, and not too highly spiced. Gradually he relaxed, and that did much to restore his strained nerves and sagging spirits. He almost began to look forward to going back out.

But relaxation and closed eyes also left his mind open to free-running images, and those were unsettling. He saw again this afternoon's boisterous, carefree throngs, and he remembered what Kalonne and Patya had told him about mascots.

They seemed so remote, so unbelievable, so unreal. And yet ... he had seen one. If another woke today and was hungry, where could it find better pickings than right in the midst of the revelry?

How would the frolickers react, he wondered. He was not at all sure. He wanted to ask Patya but decided not to. She was having too much fun. Why spoil it by reminding her of something that grim and that unlikely?

But *she* really *should* think about it oftener. She was just a kid, no matter how self-sufficient she managed to feel here.

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Imagine letting a fifteen-year-old live alone, anyway!

She brought dinner and they ate with little talk, watching the reflected sunset through the window. As the sky's pinks faded from the high glass walls, they were replaced by a fantastic three-dimensional webwork of lights that seemed to fill the sky. By day, Telrig had not even noticed the apparatus that produced it, but now the lights were there and continually changing, with color sequences chasing each other up and down and around and the paths themselves writhing and relooping gracefully.

"See?" Patya grinned, the light-webs reflected yet again in her eyes. "Just a preview, Jerol. Ready to go back out?"

He hesitated only slightly. "I suppose so." He rose and stretched. "After you, Patya."

It had cooled quite a bit, and food smells had drifted this far through the streets. It was not quite dark yet, but the blue between building silhouettes was deepening rapidly, and the light tracery was everywhere. It felt unreal, and Telrig found Patya's clicking footfalls beside him oddly reassuring.

They had gone a little more than a block when she asked, "Did you bring your camera?"

"No."

She stopped. "You really should."

"I'm a tourist, now, remember? Just looking. I've already shot all the sights."

"You haven't shot this. Believe me, Jerol, it's special. If you don't take some of it home, you'll regret it. For yourself, not your Republic."

He considered briefly. "OK. You'll come back with me?"

She shook her head. "I'll wait, if you don't mind. It's not far and we haven't hit the crowds yet. So you won't have any trouble finding me." She handed him the doorkey. "I'll be right here. Take your time."

"OK. Right back." Telrig memorized the spot and started for the house at a moderate walk. As she said, they had not reached the crowds yet, but they had moved perceptibly closer to the noise. As that faded behind him, he grew more and more conscious of his own steps, and how alone they sounded without the accompaniment of hers.

Meanwhile the darkness deepened — and the pre-dinner images stirred again in his mind.

Patya's back there alone, he found himself thinking. *In the dark, with nobody around. What if—*

He wouldn't let himself finish that thought. *Foolish of me,* he told himself sternly, *letting her stay there by herself. But I'm almost to the house now....*

His steps quickened steadily for the rest of the way.

Once in the house, he wasted no time getting the camera. He didn't even bother to check it for adequate blanks before returning to the door.

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But there he hesitated, for quite a few seconds. Then he returned quickly to the suitcase, dug straight to the bottom, and transferred the spare lasergun to his pocket — after checking it for a fresh charge. Then he locked the door and started back through the darkness, walking fast and accelerating steadily.

Patya was out there, alone and vulnerable. Without weapons ... without companions ... without even the full use of her recently injured arm.

And in the shadows, for all either of them knew, lurked mascots.

He was almost running as he neared the end of the block, and his hand was in his pocket, curled tightly around the lasergun. He earnestly hoped he would reach her before anything else did.

Preoccupied with worry about Patya, and the light and smells and sounds ahead, he never considered that *he* might be attacked. The bone-chilling bellow hit him at the same instant as the claws on his shoulders, and he was prepared for neither. He was on the ground, on his back, his breath knocked from him, before he realized what was happening. Automatically he whipped out the lasergun, but his torn shoulder cried out with such pain that he lost his grip and the weapon flew aside and vanished among dark bushes.

Somehow he fought his way up onto one knee. The beast, in front of him now, planted a set of foreclaws in his chest to push him back down. The vividly remembered scent hit him then, and a detached part of him noted, too late, that he'd been walking upwind, a perfect target for something that stalked by smell. With a choked cry, he flailed aimlessly for a moment, unable to think of anything but his pain and how *hard* that plated hide was. His leg crumpled again, its cloth covering soaked. He couldn't get back up. A huge paw held him as he stared up, the dark sky blocked by the deeper blackness of a cavernous mouth from which issued overwhelming noise and smell and heat. As the teeth descended, amid a flurry of blurred sensations, panic almost overcame him.

Somehow he remembered what Kalonne and Patya had told him. If he could reach a certain spot under the edge of a plate....

He groped with his less mangled hand, but his knowledge was theoretical, not practical. He couldn't tell how close he was to the spot. His strength was fading as the beast continued to rake at him.

It tossed its head with a stentorian hiss, trying to free itself of his groping hand. He jerked it away, pinched by the edge of a plate, and then couldn't get it back under. The beast shoved him flat on his back, pinned both arms, and opened its jaws even wider. He tried to break free but found no strength. As he realized he had lost his chance, panic finally won. His body went limp, his remaining energy draining itself in a scream.

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"Patya!"

And then he realized, slowly and dimly, that the weight was no longer on him. The bellows and stink went on, but they had shifted their focus — and another human voice had joined the fray. Off to Telrig's right, a flurry of beast and human and cloth whirled so close that sometimes their bodies bumped him as they fought. It seemed to go on for a long time.

Finally, with a long, descending wheeze, the beast fell in an inert heap. The sound and fury subsided. Telrig barely realized that he was still alive and several Sylvannese were standing around. Only one of them was close, and she looked somehow familiar.

But before he could figure out who she was, consciousness sank into a deep, black pool.

He had no idea how long it was before he again opened his eyes and saw, but when he did, she was there, too. Everything else was different. He was inside a white room, lying on his back under bright, uniform lighting. He was heavily bandaged and felt no inclination to move. There was pain in several places, but it came through a softening haze of drugs.

It took a moment for things to focus, but then he recognized her. The same girl who had saved his life, again in the same colorful shift — now patched — she had worn when he saved hers. She also had some new bandages and was sitting quietly beside the bed, as if waiting for him to wake. "Patya," he said. He was shocked by the weakness of his voice.

She smiled and touched his hand. "Hi."

"You saved my life."

"I know." She made it sound like a confession. "I had to. I didn't want to interfere, but you were pretty far gone. I thought you wanted me to."

"I did. I'm very grateful, Patya. Where I come from, we'd say I owe you my life."

Her expression became very serious. "Doesn't that bother you? To owe your life to someone else when it was entrusted to you?"

"Bother me?" He thought. "Yes. It does. A month ago I would have thought that was a ridiculous thing to say, but it does." He tried to look straight at her, but the pain of turning his neck was too great. "When I came here, Patya, it was just a job. I wasn't interested in learning any more about this planet or its ways than I had to to get the job done. I still don't really understand — not completely — but I'm going to. And I've made my decision. A place that produces people like you has things the Republic needs, all right, but they're not what the Republic thinks. I'm just beginning to see what they are."

Patya drew back slightly; bitterness crept into her voice. "But will we be able to keep them, after your Republic has ... absorbed us?"

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He noticed a single small bunch of flowers hanging on the wall over the other side of the bed and remembered where he had seen others like them — in Patya's dooryard. "That's not going to happen," he said finally. "*I* need the things that are here, even though they scare me half to death. For a while, before I opened my eyes, I was thinking of just deserting and staying, but I can't do that. They'd just send somebody else to do my job. No, Patya, I'll have to stay with it long enough to convince them they'll get the most from Sylvanne not by dragging you in as a member, but by dealing with you as an equal."

"I'm touched," Patya said flatly. "Really. But how can you hope to convince them of that after all you've already sent back?"

"I don't know. But I will, Patya. Believe me. And *then* I'll stay here, for the rest of my life."

She looked at him for quite a while. He thought he saw a quiver in her lip and a mist in her eyes. At last she said, very softly, "I wish I could believe that. But you're not thinking clearly now. You're still raving from the injuries and drugs." She stood up. "'Bye, Jerol. I'll be back to see you when you feel better — and by then you'll have changed your mind."

She turned and walked to the door. He tried to call after her that she was wrong, that he *wouldn't* change his mind, but he couldn't find his voice in time.

No matter. She'd find out eventually. *He* knew he wouldn't change.

He'd never been so sure of anything in his life.

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Here, one year after Susan Petrey's death, is the first of four unpublished stories we have acquired thanks to the help of her family and her friend, Steve Perry. They are all stories about the Varkela healers of the Russian steppe, and this one concerns Vaylance, the brother of Spareen (who figures in "Spareen Among the Tartars," September 1979 and "Spareen Among the Cossacks," April 1981).

The Healer's Touch

BY

SUSAN C. PETREY

"We will no longer pay you the blood-price," said the Nogai Tartar chieftain looking down at Vaylance from the back of his stumpty, ewe-necked horse. A whole tribe of these small, dark men had ridden over to tell him this. Wind whipped the Tartar's baggy horsemen's trousers and hissed through the tall feather grasses of the Russian steppe that barely brushed the horses' bellies.

Vaylance resisted an urge to wipe his nose on the cuff of his black Kalmuck jacket. At 16, he was shaman's apprentice and must maintain some show of decorum. Silently cursing the allergies that had plagued him since he came to the steppe, he chose his words carefully.

"We have always cured your ills in the past. Do not forsake us now."

The hawk-nosed Nogai continued to peer at Vaylance sternly from under his shaggy sheepskin hat.

"You have not healed; therefore, we will not pay," and so saying, turned his horse and rode back the way he had come, his followers harrowing a path through the tall grasses. The sun made an ocher wound on the western horizon where gauzy clouds moved to cover it.

Black-water fever was the cause of the Nogai's refusal to pay. Clouds of biting insects drifting up from the marshes and backwaters of the Volga brought with them the usual summer fevers, but this year malaria, the dread black-water disease, was taking a heavy toll, and Vaylance's father, the Varkela shaman, knew no herb or treatment specific for the disease.

Vaylance stood watching, pondering his situation. The Nogai's declaration came at a bad time, with his sister Rayorka sick and badly in need of

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blood-payment. He turned his back on the Nogais and ducked through the leather door of his father's yurt, a dwelling of thick felt stretched over an umbrella-like wooden frame. He finally wiped his recalcitrant nose on the sleeve of his black Tartar jacket — the last gift his mother had given to him when he had come here at age twelve, barely a frightened child, to take his apprenticeship as a Varkela shaman, leaving her to continue her practice as a medium and spiritual healer in the garret seances of Petersburg. She had sent him to his father to learn the ways of his people. "For you must never forget that you are Varkela," she had admonished him. On the steppe, life was much different, and at first he had resented the seemingly uncouth savage that was his father, until he had seen the shaman cure ills that the Petersburg doctors, with all their pills and powders couldn't touch. It was then that his apprenticeship had really begun, as he grew to respect the healing methods of his people, an old race that called themselves Varkela, "the Children of the Night."

In the darkness of the yurt Vaylance blinked a few times as his nocturnal eyes made the transition. His half-sister, Rayorka, 14, was lying on the Turkish carpet. She smiled wanly and beckoned him to come sit beside her. In her weakened state she could barely raise her head. His brother, Spareen, 11, small and stout, with his hair tied back in a tail, was sitting along the far wall, polishing his saddle with a little soap and oil. The leather squeaked congenially under his ministrations, and the smell of leather and neat's-foot oil mingled pleasantly with the sweet scent of herbs that hung from the ceiling in bunches: vervain, sweet flag, chamomile, valerian root and willow leaf.

"The Nogais have refused to pay us," he announced, kneeling down to sit on the rug. His retractile blood-teeth ached in his jaw from his hunger, and he wondered what Rayorka must be feeling, for her hunger would be twice his now that her menses had started. She certainly looked pale and tired. This was a dangerous time for a Varkela girl — few of them survived puberty to adulthood due to the insidious nature of the blood-need. She was a pretty one, dark-haired and dark-eyed, like her two brothers. Breasts were just beginning to form buds beneath her smock. Vaylance counted himself lucky to have a sister — so many of the female children were stillborn. As he watched, she closed her eyes and dozed.

Spareen finished scrubbing the saddle and stood up to lug it outside, apparently ready to talk horse-talk with the herd.

"If she's going to be sick for a while, can I ride the sorrel mare?" he asked. That was Spareen for you, preferring horses to people.

"Our sister may die, and all you can think about is riding her horse. No

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wonder Father calls you the selfish one. Why don't you help me by making a fire and boiling up some willow-leaf tea?" Vaylance gestured toward the blackened kettle that hung on a rod over the fire pit.

"Make fire in here on such a hot night?" asked Spareen. "We'll roast her to death. Besides, willow-leaf tea won't help blood-need."

"Make the fire outside then," said Vaylance. "Willow tea will at least ease the pain in her joints."

"It seems like all we ever do is take care of her any more," said Spareen, sullenly, reaching for the flint and steel that hung on the yurt frame by the door. As a parting shot, he asked, "If she wakes up, would you ask her about the mare?"

Vaylance was on his feet in an instant.

"Get moving, fart-maker!" He snatched one of the ceremonial antlers from his father's gear and attacked his brother's retreating rump, but Spareen, agile as his soul-beast, the otter, narrowly avoided the prongs and sprinted through the flap to safety.

Vaylance eased himself down and lay beside his sleeping sister. He reached into a pocket and drew out a piece of cord and tied it around his upper arm, causing the veins to show in the crook of the elbow. Gently he shook her awake and pressed his naked arm to her lips.

"Here, Ray, take from me."

"No, you need it." She pushed his arm away, but he insisted.

"I have enough. I was paid yesterday." He forced the arm to her mouth and this time she acquiesced. One of her thin, sharp were-teeth punctured the vein and his life blood flowed into her.

He had not always had a sister. He remembered the night, two years ago, when the tall, severe Cossack woman had ridden into their camp with the slip of a girl mounted up behind.

"Take back your Satan's whelp, Freneer!" She had addressed his father.

"What do you mean, woman?" asked Freneer, standing up, running a wrinkled hand through his long grey hair, tied back with string.

The woman untied the girl's blouse strings, and ignoring her protest, peeled back the cloth to reveal her naked chest. In the slight groove between the unformed breasts grew a patch of grey down-like fur, which diffused into scant peach-fuzz over her belly.

"If I'd fathered a child, you might have told me, and I'd have gladly taken her," said Freneer.

"I had not known she was yours until now, when she began to grow hair like your kind. If I marry her off, her husband will scorn her and make her a laughing stock in the village."

"She will be highly prized among us," said Freneer. "A female of the blood is always welcome."

The woman remounted and rode away, leaving them to comfort as best they could the frightened new addition

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to their family. Freneer had christened her Rayorka, or "little treasure." Spareen had resented his father's new favorite, but Vaylance took her under his protection. He knew what it was like to be uprooted and replanted in a strange place. He spent much time helping her to adapt to her new life, and soon she knew how to gather the right herbs for medicine, how to speak the horse's language that only the Varkela understand, how to quiet a frightened animal or child so that one may doctor it, and how to take the payment for such services in human blood.

Vaylance could hear the crackling of brush outside the yurt as Spareen attempted to make a fire. He was watching a bead of moisture roll down the side of the waterskin that hung on the wall to drop onto his sister's hair, when Spareen called out to him:

"There's someone coming!"

Vaylance drew his spare, lean frame up from the rug and ducked out the door flap. It was getting dark, but he could easily see that a distant speck approached across the billowing waves of grass. As the rider drew nearer Vaylance identified him as a Kalmuck by his high cheekbones, slanted oriental eyes, and the dark-colored knee-length jacket flapping in the wind. They were a nomadic people of Mongolian origin, of a later migration than the Nogais who touted themselves as descendants of Ghenghis Khan.

"I hope he's coming to pay," said Vaylance, feeling his mouth water in anticipation. The tips of his blood-teeth began to protrude from their little sheaths in his upper jaw. It had been a week since the last one had come, in spite of what he'd told Rayorka — and it was near time to feed their hunger again.

"He'll pay," said Spareen. "The Nogais may forsake us, but the Kalmucks have never let us down." He was poking at a pile of brush that generated more smoke than flame.

But the Kalmuck had not come to pay. He pulled his stocky little horse to a stop, dismounted, flipping his queue over his shoulder, and began to explain how he'd taken a fall in a marriage-day horse race and said, "Leechman, I believe the arm is broken."

Vaylance drew back the wide sleeve of the man's jacket and saw that the arm was quite bruised. His probing fingers detected a fracture. There would be no payment from this one until he was healed up, Vaylance thought, as he led the man into the yurt, gathered a pair of splints and began to tear the linen they kept for bandaging. After half an hour of deft maneuvering, the bone break was set. Vaylance yearned to press his lips to the healthy arm and bleed payment into his aching vessels — but that just wasn't done, not until the patient was well enough to sustain the loss. He pressed a parcel of comfrey root into the Kalmuck's hand and explained to him how to make bone-set tea, before sending him on his way.

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As the figure grew smaller in the distance, Vaylance could feel the pain of his unsatisfied need. It was at times like this that he envied Spareen, who did not have his teeth yet — who would not know this dark hunger for another two years.

Two kepar a month, a little over a pint, was all that Vaylance needed, taken a little here, a little there, from those who subscribed to the medical services of his father. That was not difficult, for Freneer's reputation as a healer was well known on the steppe. But they had not figured on Rayorka's getting "the sickness," or on the Nogai's refusal to pay. Something would have to be done.

Vaylance returned to Rayorka's side. He was just settling down on the worn carpet when Spareen stuck his head in the door and said, "The water boils."

"Take a cup and steep ten willow leaves," Vaylance ordered. It was an old pain remedy good for headache and joint ailments. Spareen came in, reached overhead and began stripping dry leaves from the trailing willow branches. He grabbed one of two tin cups that hung on pegs from the yurt frame and slipped out the door, returning quickly, clutching the steaming cup by the brim.

"By the blood, that's hot!" he exclaimed, blowing on his fingers, after setting it down.

"Let the tea cool while I try a different remedy," said Vaylance. Assuming a cross-legged position, he placed his hands so that his fingers touched in a steeple pose.

"I'm going to try healer's touch." This was one area where his people's methods far outshown the Russian physicians in Moscow.

"You're going to touch heal without Father here?" asked Spareen, incredulous.

"Yes, I've done it before without his help — remember how I healed the Cheremiss boy with brain fever?"

"But Father was there with you every minute of that. I saw you with your fingers fluxing one minute and dead the next. Father was just about to put out his hand and stop you, but somehow you managed the transition on your own."

"And I couldn't have done it at all without your proper singing of the chant," said Vaylance, who knew that Spareen's objection was based in part on envy. A touch-healer was greatly respected among the Varkela, and Vaylance had begun to show signs of this gift at an early age.

"Do you really think touch healing will help her?" asked Spareen. "I thought it was only good for brain fever and diseases of the soul."

"Who knows if healer's touch works only on the soul?" said Vaylance. "Don't all diseases in some way affect the soul? Look at our sister there. Isn't her soul in pain as well as her body?"

Spareen looked at Rayorka. Her

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eyes wandered unseeing beneath translucent lids.

"Well ... she does look as if her soul has strayed...." he began.

"Then we shall call it back," said Vaylance. "We must at least try. She's getting weaker, and there's no telling when Father will get back. He would be pleased if we put some of our training to use."

"Or angry if we muff things up," said Spareen. "But there's no use arguing with *you* once your mind is made up on something. Do you want me to sing the words or just hum the tune?"

"With words of course."

"What if I say it wrong and a ghost comes?"

"Don't be silly," said Vaylance. "You've heard Father say it a million times and sometimes even his tongue slips, but no ghost ever comes."

"I don't know," said Spareen. "Remember the old story of how the shaman Sarmance accidentally called up the Mother of Horses, and she made him sterile, saying, 'Thy seed shall have no issue'?"

"You're a bit young to be concerned about being sterile, Spareen."

"I don't want to take any chances," said Spareen. "When I grow up, I want to be able to get a child on an outblood woman, like Father."

Vaylance laughed at this statement. Matings with humankind were often unproductive, and to impregnate a human female was regarded as a sign of especial virility.

"I'm sure you will, Spareen, since you've an exceptional talent for mischief, but there will be plenty of time for that. Now, let's get on with it, or I *shall* summon up a ghost to make you sterile."

Thus admonished, Spareen began to sing the chant, his pure treble mingling with the cricket voices in the grass outside. Vaylance set his mind to the task. Since coming to the steppe, he had had to learn a whole other way of thinking. Pressing his fingertips lightly together and then drawing them apart, he began to feel the pulse and flow of energy across the gap. The flux was thin and tenuous as spider silk, spanning the distance between his fingers like elastic thread, stretching thin when he moved his hands apart, and becoming a faint blue haze as he brought them together, thickening the field.

He shifted his weight so that he could touch Rayorka's forehead with one hand. Her eyes opened and the blue aura of his fingertips shimmered in their dark depths, but she appeared not to see him. Spareen reached the end of the stanza and began to croon the high, keening sound that came between verses.

In a low voice, Vaylance spoke to the soul of his sister. He willed the power in his fingers to reach into her skull and placed a hand on her stomach to receive the flow as it returned to him.

Rayorka stirred under his touch.

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She blinked her eyes and said, "Vaylance, is it you? Your hand feels cool, and I'm so hot."

Vaylance helped her sit up and placed the cup to her lips, that she might drink the infusion. She drank slowly, her hands shaking as she tried to hold the cup. Vaylance steadied her until she got it all down.

"I had the strangest dream," she said. "There was a little man mounted on the back of a grey stag. Ohhh — he's calling to me...."

"Don't listen to him, Rayorka, stay with us," Vaylance implored her, but she slowly relaxed in his arms and was lost to him again.

Vaylance knew that the grey-ghost stag was the guide to the nether world, the soul-beast of the shaman. He'd seen it himself when his father had given him ceremonial hashish at his initiation, but to the noninitiate, he knew the stag implied approaching death.

Spareen began a new verse, chanting louder, as if he hoped by singing to bring her back.

As he held her, Vaylance, in his deepening trance state, saw a movement at his sister's nose. A small grey head poked out of her left nostril. He watched as the tiny, grey wolf, soul-beast of his sister, carefully sniffed the air and proceeded to leave the cave of the nostril, wandering down her lip, across her chest and finally descending to the floor of the yurt. The little wolf paused to look back at him once, poised there, one paw lifted, and then departed through a crack in the felt siding. Vaylance tried to follow in his mind and found himself within a dark tunnel. There was a dim light at the end and he could see the small wolf trotting a ways ahead. He tried to project himself in the same direction when, suddenly, a tall, gaunt, red-eyed shape reared up before him. A swirling fog thickened and coalesced into the thin, cadaverous grey-ghost stag, trailing mist like grave clothes.

"You may not pass," said the red-eyed stag. Small green fires played among its antlers and skeletal ribs showed under its taut hide.

"I must follow my sister," said Vaylance.

"Where she goes, you may not follow," said the stag. "She will stay with us until you've earned blood and life to sustain her. She will stay forever if you do not."

Then the image faded and Vaylance was next aware of someone calling his name. He opened his eyes and saw the stag again in hazy vision, blinked, and saw that the leathern ancient face of his father, Freneer, gazed at him from beneath the shaman's staghorn headdress. Freneer reached up and removed the "two trees of wisdom" from his head and placed it on the low altar, made from a wooden box.

"Praise the Moon," he said, his weathered features cracked with lines of care. "I was afraid we had lost you to the eternal dream. You must never do that without my help. Not until you

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are firmly grounded."

Vaylance sat up and rubbed his eyes. His mouth tasted as if he had been long asleep. "How long have I been in trance?" he asked.

"For two hours I've been trying to wake you. Spareen says you were in trance before the moon went down."

"What of Rayorka?"

"She worsens. Spareen tells me the Nogais have refused to pay us. If this is true, she will die, for without their support we can not expect to nurse a woman through 'the sickness.' We will be lucky to earn enough to sustain you, my son."

"But if we found a cure to the black-water disease, then they would pay us," said Vaylance.

"But there is no cure," said Freneer. "Neither touch healing, nor herbs, nor diet, nor singing of the chant can cure black-water fever."

"Still, there must be a way, and I intend to find it," said Vaylance. "I will go on a healer's quest. Perhaps there is a Russian doctor at the Cossack fort at Groznoi who knows of a cure."

"A Russian doctor? I've little use for them. Their way of healing is to bleed their patients nearly to death."

"Not all of them practice bleeding," said Vaylance. "Some of them produce cures with powerful medicines. Perhaps they have one for the black-water fever."

"And how would you persuade this doctor to help you? For if he be of Slavic race, and he finds out what you are, he will drive a stake through your heart to 'save your soul,' as their perverse religion teaches."

"They needn't find out what I am," said Vaylance. "I will keep my blood-teeth retracted to their sheaths. Everyone will think I am just a Tartar from the steppes. I will not tell them that I need the cure to earn blood."

"I can see that you are determined to go," said Freneer, and to Vaylance he seemed suddenly very old and tired. Lines wrinkled his brow and then smoothed, as he heaved a great sigh, as though setting down a heavy burden. "We are an old race, and we are dying out," he said. "I suppose it doesn't matter whether it happens now or a little later. My blessing on you, son; may you stay in the land of the living."

Vaylance set out at daybreak, the time when Varkela normally settled into their death-like daytime sleep. He tied a piece of black cloth over his nocturnal eyes to protect them and turned Spurka, his little Turkmene mare, toward the South. On the way he told her of the importance of his mission, and she gave encouragement in the horse language, twitching an ear to say, "Don't worry, young master. I will travel quickly."

Her smooth, swinging trot ate the versts, and he began to see in the distance the abrupt blue wall of the Caucasus Mountains that terminated the vast grassy steppe. The armies of Czar

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Nicholas I were at war with the fanatic Moslems of the mountains and the fort at Groznoi was one of the chief military outposts in the area. For this reason, Vaylance had deemed it prudent to approach the fort in the daylight hours, that he might not be mistaken for an enemy. If he'd figured right, he would arrive in the late afternoon.

At midday he stopped, for he was feeling a little weak — probably the blood-need, gnawing at his vitals, he thought — a brief rest wouldn't hurt anything. He poured himself a frothy bowl of kumiss from the goatskin bag over his saddle bow and lapped at it with his pink dog-like tongue. He was immediately reminded of Rayorka's funny little outblood tongue, no good at all for licking. Not two days ago her hands had milked the mare that had provided him this meal. A lump rose in his throat and he fought back tears — little sister, who mended the steppe owl's broken wing, will I ever see you again? He realized that he would need his wits undulled by emotion, if he expected to carry out his mission. He pushed Rayorka from his mind and concentrated on the black-water fever. It was a painful disease that left the body racked and wasted between bouts of chills and fever. Discolored urine gave the disease its name and was the most serious stage of the illness. And its contagion was such that no Varkela leechman dared take his special wages until symptoms had been gone for several years. Payment was usually taken from healthy members of the family in these cases. Vaylance had savored the taste of his last payment like scarlet liquor on the tongue — a strapping Nogai with veins thick as stems of cattail. His blood-teeth ached at the thought as he allowed himself to drift in currents of sleep. Only a few minutes, he promised himself.

"Wake up, son of a Tartar dog!" These words resounded in Vaylance's skull, and a booted foot prodded him in the gut. Vaylance sat up. With a sickening feeling, he saw that it was getting dark. He'd overslept and missed his chance to enter the fort in daylight.

An enormous Cossack grinned down at him over rows of cartridge cases across his breast, a toothy snarl showing beneath a wheat-straw mustache. His blue eyes hungered like waiting vultures.

"Get a rope on him, Ivan Ivanovitch," he bellowed. "We'll teach this Muslim to drink vodka like a proper Christian before we cut his balls off!"

A rope fell in a tangled skein on Vaylance's legs.

"Hold off, Stepan. Don't mess him up too much," said Ivanovitch from his horse. "Maybe he's from one of the peaceful tribes. He has the look of the steppe about him. Not like those mountain devils we're after — What's your tribe, boy?" Ivan Ivanovitch looked older than Stepan. On the lean side, he wore his black moustache curved like a Turkish scimitar.

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"I'm Nogai," said Vaylance, trying to look as peaceable as he could. He wanted to conceal his Varkela origin from them, for the Cossacks had superstitions about the people who came out at night and drank human blood.

"You don't look like a Nogai," boomed Stepan, giving Vaylance another boot in the stomach. "Get up! Move! You're a prisoner of the Terek Cossacks, and if you're smart, you'll tell us where the rest of the Circassian infidels you came with are hiding."

"But I'm not Circassian," Vaylance insisted. "My people are from the steppe."

"You're too light-skinned for a Nogai," said Stepan, fingering the filigree hilt of his saber ominously.

"But he's dressed like one," said Ivan. "Leave him be. The ataman won't like it if you provoke an incident with one of the peaceful tribes."

"The ataman be damned! Him and that blasted doctor have turned you all into school boys and nursing sisters," said Stepan. "No soft-bellied book-learning for me. I'm for rendering this fellow's fat, here and now."

Vaylance's hope sprang up at the word "doctor." "It's the doctor that I've come to see," he cried. "You see, many members of my tribe are sick, and we thought that he might have the right medicine."

"That's a clever way to get a spy into the fort," said Stepan, his vulture's eyes yearning toward the long-awaited morsel.

"We'll see how long you stick to that story." He bent down and grabbed the rope and began to loop it over Vaylance's arms.

Vaylance was not about to let himself be trussed like a hog for the butcher and lashed out with one foot, catching the Cossack in the knee. He swung at Stepan's head, but only managed to send the Cossack's fur-covered shapka flying. The struggle ended when Stepan threw his full weight on Vaylance and wrestled him to the ground. Vaylance howled his rage at being pinned helplessly, but stopped abruptly, when he felt the tips of his were-teeth begin to protrude from their little niches in his upper jaw. If he sees that, I'm done for, he thought and clamped his lips firmly shut. He might have used his teeth in self-defense. A well-placed bite could sever an artery. But he held back. His nature was to mend wounds, not make them, and better to be a live prisoner than to have his mutilated corpse displayed as a "vampire."

Stepan flipped him onto his stomach and proceeded to knot the rope about his hands. If they took him to the fort, perhaps he could persuade someone there to let him speak to the doctor. But after the knot was tied, Stepan seemed to have other plans. He pulled a nine-inch dagger from the sheath in his waist band and began to toy with it. Vaylance watched the dagger, glinting in the last rays of the setting sun. He realized that they were not going

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to take him to the fort, at least not right away....

"You know what we do with Tartar boys?" asked Stepan.

"First we make a fire and heat up the knife nice and hot."

"Stepan Grigorovitch, I will not be party to this," said Ivan. "I wash my hands of you."

"If you go bearing tales about me," said Stepan to Ivan, "I will tell what I know about you and Pencherevsky's wife."

"If you do it will be the death of you, Stepan." Ivan rode away toward where the trees thickened in a snaky line between the hills.

The fire flamed up rapidly, fed with dung and resinous sage. Soot blackened the dagger except for the tip which glowed like a sunset.

I should have gone for the throat when I had a chance, thought Vaylance. Stepan knelt over him and stripped off one of Vaylance's felt boots. Vaylance felt the heat of the knife where Stepan held it inches from his bared sole. A good thing his father had taught him to trance, and with a certain mental exercise he willed his foot not to feel the pain. At one point, however, when trance failed him, his needle-like blood teeth protruded full length like fangs of some venomous snake in its death agony.

"Gospodee! Thou art one of the demonkind," cried Stepan. He crossed himself and raised the knife, holding it poised over Vaylance's breast.

"Fire!" came a command.

A shot broke the air and Stepan fell full length over him. Vaylance looked up to see Ivan seated on horseback, his musket directed at Stepan. The sharp tang of black powder drifted on the air. With Ivan was a sturdy, grey-haired man with full red face as if he blew through some reeded instrument, his cheeks puffed out like the rebab player at a Tartar wedding.

"I came for ... doctor," said Vaylance and lapsed into unconsciousness.

When he awoke, Vaylance found himself in a large room with rows of cots. The windows were high up and small, allowing little daylight, which suited Vaylance's nocturnal eyes very well. He noted that his foot pained him terribly and was swathed in white bandages. Trance was only partially successful, as he was not yet totally adept at the art. In the dimness he could see men lying on cots about him. Some were bandaged, but many moaned and tossed in the grip of fever.

"So, you're awake, lad," a voice called to him from across the room. Vaylance saw what he had not noticed before — a desk stood in one corner with a battered old samovar steaming on one end. The large, red-faced man at the desk hailed him.

"Doctor Rimsky at your service. You must answer a few questions to satisfy my commanding officer. First of all, what are you doing here and what tribe are you?"

"I am Nogai," said Vaylance, "and

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I've come to find a cure for the blackwater fever. Many of our tribe are dying of it and we have no medicine." Vaylance felt uncomfortable lying to this man. He felt a strange desire to trust this outblood doctor, but he feared the consequences.

"Well, I think we can do something about that," said Rimsky.

He picked up a parcel, wrapped in white paper and strolled over to the cot where Vaylance was lying.

"Cinchona bark from the new world," he said, peeling off the paper to reveal some brown, woody stuff. "It's a specific for malaria."

Vaylance touched the crumbly bark — an herbal remedy from the new world?

"Does it work?" he asked.

"Very well indeed," said Rimsky. "You see Plotinsky over there?"

Vaylance looked. A blond Russian soldier nodded to him from a bed across the room.

"Three days ago he was in the throes of fever, but you couldn't tell that from looking at him now."

Valance agreed. The blond soldier was bright-eyed — nothing of sickness about him.

"Will you sell me some of this bark, then," Vaylance asked hopefully.

"No, because I would have to be there to administer the proper dosage. What we'll do is, I'll ride out with you as soon as you're well enough to travel, and we'll put an end to the epidemic among your people."

Vaylance's bubble of hope burst — having this outblood doctor cure the Nogai would not earn blood for Rayorka. Somehow he would have to convince this doctor to let him take the medicine to the Nogais himself.

"That would be much trouble for you," Vaylance ventured. "Couldn't you teach me the proper dosage? In my family we are shamans and healers, and I have often dosed illness with herbal preparations. If you tell me the strength of dose and when to administer it, it would save you much trouble."

"I'm not sure I would feel right entrusting the care of malarial patients to a shamanist. With all respect to your family, Vaylance, shamanism may be helpful in the sense that it deals with the soul and religious aspects of healing, but it can not be a substitute for modern medicine."

It angered Vaylance to have his people's knowledge belittled in this way. He had seen his father cure illnesses that "modern medicine" could not. He'd even done a few of the more difficult soul-mendings himself. Somehow he must earn this doctor's trust and respect.

"Would it be all right if I went with you on your rounds? I'm sure I could learn a lot," he said.

"Now that's the sort of attitude I like," said Rimsky, "love of learning. Do you read, boy? I'll set you to study a little surgery, until your foot heals up. Can't have you walking around on blistered feet."

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"I can't read yet," said Vaylance, "but I'd like to learn." His mother had taught him the Russian alphabet. "There are whole other worlds in books," she used to say.

"Excellent," said Rimsky. "I'll send one of my Cossack students to read for you. You'll pick up a little knowledge and it will be good practice for him. That reminds me — you say your family are shamanists — have you ever heard of a tribe called Varkela? Supposedly they practice medicine in exchange for human blood."

Vaylance's blood turned to ice in his veins. Should he blurt it all out? Make his secret known?

"I've never heard of them," he said, hoping Rimsky would divulge a bit more.

"Probably nothing more than another vampire legend," said Rimsky. "Still it is an intriguing proposition, is it not?"

"Yes, very," said Vaylance. "It would be proof that the drinking of blood is not in all cases evil." He thought the doctor looked at him a bit strangely.

That afternoon, the young Cossack, Plotinsky sat at the foot of Vaylance's bed and read to him from a text of anatomy. Vaylance was not surprised that Russian medicine seemed to know little of yin and yang, acupuncture and the flow of Ki energy in touch healing, but there were also many things to learn from them, details of anatomy that could only have been learned by dissection of cadavers — a practice forbidden by the burial rites of most of the peoples of the steppe. He was fascinated with the fine detail in the pictures. "Whole other worlds in books," as his mother had often told him. The surgery text was even more wonderful and strange, with names of instruments of which he'd never heard: surgical forceps, amputating saws. He longed to be able to read the text himself and pestered Plotinsky to help him sound out the words.

That afternoon, when he felt well enough to hobble around with a crutch, he followed Rimsky on his rounds, and carefully observed his treatment of the *Great Fever.*

"It's important that malarial fever be caught early, before it progresses to the black-water stage," said Rimsky, "for then even cinchona bark will have little effect — and may cause an adverse reaction.

"Now, then, Vaylance," he continued, "just to be sure we are working with the same disease, would you describe the symptoms of this 'black-water fever' your people suffer from."

Vaylance wished he could say that his people didn't suffer from it at all, that it was an outblood disease, but he felt he'd better be consistent in his story. Dutifully he began to describe the symptoms he had observed among the Nogai Tartars.

"First come chills for several minutes to an hour. Next is fever that lasts 4 to 6 hours. Next the sweating and fin-

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ally sleep. The patient awakens feeling much better, but in two to three days it comes again. After the second cycle, some may develop black urine and die. Others may have milder attacks which keep recurring at two to three day intrervals. These do not die or develop black urine, but they may have the disease intermittently throughout life. And one must not take blood from them."

"You have very good clinical observation, Vaylance, to catch on to different forms of malaria, but your last statement about the blood — what does that mean?"

Vaylance mentally damned himself for letting that slip out. What he had meant was that his people did not take blood in payment from malarial patients, but rather from their relatives, for it had been found long ago that it was possible to transfer the disease to the next human one bit for payment, although the Varkela themselves were immune. He puzzled how to answer the question.

"Just an old custom of my people," he finally said.

Fortunately, Rimsky let the subject drop.

"I had a son who died," he mused. "He would have been just about your age." His eyes stared into the distance, as if reliving old pain.

How sad, thought Vaylance, who felt as if he had blundered into some sacred woodland shrine.

* * *

During the course of the afternoon, Vaylance found that the treatment he sought consisted of giving a purgative, followed by hourly doses of a strong infusion of cinchona bark, given before the next attack was expected. It was apparently an effective treatment, for although some patients had recurrent bouts of fever, few reached the fatal black-water stage.

Late that afternoon Rimsky ushered Vaylance into his book-lined study and allowed him to peer through a small metal tube with glass lenses in it. The microcosm of "cavorting, wee beasties in a drop of water" fascinated him. Whole other worlds in a drop of pond water.

"There's a French doctor I correspond with, who believes that disease may be caused by infestations of this kind of tiny animals." said Rimsky.

On another slide, Rimsky pricked his finger and allowed a drop of blood to fall. Vaylance's mouth watered and his hunger pained him so that his blood-teeth began to protrude. But Rimsky, involved in putting a cover slide on the drop, did not notice. The blood on the slide was a viscous fluid filled with millions of tiny, red, flattened discs. The delicious scent of fresh blood filled Vaylance's eager nostrils, and a sweet dizziness overtook him.

"Easy there, lad," the doctor caught him. "You seem a bit tipsy. Perhaps I was mistaken to let you up so soon. Go back and bed down again. I'll see you in the morning."

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Vaylance was only too happy to have a bit of daytime sleep. His nocturnal pattern had been upset and blood-need ached hollowly through his vessels. Passing for an outblood Tartar was taking its toll. Another day had passed and he was still no closer to the cure that would feed his sister. He dreamed of Rayorka on her pallet, lifeless. He touched her and her body crackled, broke and blew away, like the dry leaves of autumn.

He awoke to find the doctor sitting on his bed talking to Plotinsky.

"Ah, there. He's awake," said Rimsky. "Bring the dose."

Plotinsky offered a beaker of the cinchona infusion.

"Just a preventative, Vaylance. This will keep you from contracting malaria yourself."

Vaylance was about to object that this wasn't necessary for him, but remembered that he had better go along with it to keep his story straight.

When he tasted the vile stuff, he wished he hadn't. Bitter! His thin, pink dog-like tongue snaked out unbidden to wash the beastly stuff from his lips.

"Amazing," said Rimsky. "Do that again."

"What?" asked Vaylance, wishing he could bite off the foolish licking tongue that had betrayed him.

"Show me your tongue. There's something strange about it."

Vaylance complied, allowing his tongue to loll like a dog's. His mind raced to explain the anomaly.

"We in my family all have this deformity. It's an inherited trait," he said, feeling this was not quite the same as a lie.

"Very peculiar," said Rimsky, knotting bushy gray eyebrows over his nose. "Such a trait is differentiating to such an extent that I would venture that your family is a subspecies of *Homo sapiens. Homo sapiens lupus*, I would offer as a name. He looks a bit wolvish, don't you think, Plotinsky? Perhaps we've stumbled on a new race — must write this up and send it to a scientific journal. Drink the rest, lad. We don't want you getting sick on us."

Vaylance finished the vile liquid, avoiding the little bits of bark in the residue. Oh, what he would have given for a dose of fresh human blood in a similar proportion. But one could not ask for blood unless one had earned through healing, and one certainly could not expect to get it here. The Russians and Cossacks played by different rules than the nomadic Tartars. Perhaps he would have to stoop to blood-theft in the night to feed his need. His teeth yearned for the thick red juice of life. It was painful to lie here in bed thinking about blood. How much more so Rayorka! He resolved to put his own selfish thirst aside until he'd solved the problem: how to gain the cure for malaria so that the Nogai would come to pay them once again. Somehow he must convince Rimsky of his ability to prepare the dosage on his own.

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"If I may, will you let me prepare the dosages today?" he asked, thinking that perhaps Rimsky would perceive that he was capable and yield the bark to him.

"I'm afraid your mathematics are a bit naive, Vaylance, and I would have to spend many hours to teach you what I can do in a few minutes for myself," said Rimsky.

It was true. Vaylance's knowledge of the Russian system of weights and measures was sadly lacking. He'd forgotten much since he'd lived with his mother. His people had their own way of measuring dosages, based on body weight, age, and severity of symptoms, but this would not help him until he was able to translate from Dr. Rimsky's system to his own.

"But let me at least help you," he insisted. Perhaps if he learned enough, through watching, he could take the precious bark and reproduce the cure himself. But that would be stealing, like the blood-thief who comes in the night, leaving nothing in return.

It was a long day, measuring dosages for each patient. Every time Vaylance thought he had gotten it right, Rimsky would point out that he had forgotten to carry a figure to the tens column or had failed to convert from grams to drachmas. He was about to despair of ever learning the system when another plan suggested itself.

Rimsky was cleaning up his work bench and offering Vaylance to share a glass of tea from the samovar when Plotinsky came in, concern showing in his plump, healthy face, and said, "They've brought her again. She's mad as a rabid dog this time."

Vaylance noted that Rimsky's red-faced jovial visage became a few shades paler. He shook his head sadly and said, "There's little I can do but restrain her and give her a sleeping draught. But tell the parents to wait and I'll come."

Insanity — a disease of the soul — this was something he understood; perhaps if he offered his services, he could win Rimsky's confidence and achieve his goal.

"My people know how to cure madness, sir," he ventured, "perhaps if you'd let me try...." He hoped it was a simple form of madness. Spareen had been right. It had been mostly luck with the Cheremiss boy. If only his father were here....

But Rimsky waved him aside. "There is no cure for madness, lad. It comes and goes as it wills. Would you have us rattle bones and chant, where modern methods fail? Get back to your bed. I'll be around to see you later."

Much disgruntled, Vaylance was led back to the infirmary and made to change into his night shirt. He pulled the voluminous garment over his clothes and disrobed under it to avoid showing Plotinsky his furry chest, belly and loins. He pulled the sheets up and feigned rest until Plotinsky left, then crept from bed and made his way down the hallway.

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He quickly covered the distance to the study and stood just beyond the doorway, watching the scene in the next room. A young girl, her hands tied behind her back, crouched on the floor, making low animal noises in her throat. Dr. Rimsky tried to raise her and place her in a chair, but she screamed and fought him. Her fear-crazed eyes rolled wildly and she continued to scream through clenched teeth. A drool of spittle rolled down her chin. A plump woman, probably the girl's mother, covered her eyes and wept. The father put an arm around his wife and said to Rimsky, "You see how it is? We just can't control her. She persists in these wild rages."

The girl, mewling like some wounded mountain panther, kicked over the chair and it clattered to the floor. Her father reached her in two strides, took her by the shoulders and began to shake her.

"Stop it!" he cried. "By all that's holy, stop it!"

"Wait!" called Vaylance from his post by the door. "That's not the way at all!"

A hush fell on the room, as everyone stared in his direction. Even the mad girl ceased to scream and looked his way. Vaylance fixed his eyes on her and began to speak to her, as one speaks to comfort a frightened horse. Doctor Rimsky made as if to object, but Vaylance waved him silent, never taking his eyes from the terrified orbs of the girl.

"I know what I'm doing, Doctor," he said. "Do not interfere."

He fervently hoped that this was a form of madness that would succumb to his methods and that he would prove himself worthy of the respect of this outblood doctor. Because the girl had stopped screaming, all seemed willing to watch, spellbound, as Vaylance, looking spectral in his nightshirt, crossed the room, arms outstretched and placed his hands on the sick girl's head.

Kneeling down beside her, he began to sing the chant as he had heard his father do so many times. If I can just bring it off, he thought, I will open another world to you, my outblood doctor. Carefully, carefully he repeated the words and felt the spasms of Ki energy flowing through his fingers — rush and flow, rush and flow like waves on a beach. The smooth flow of his Ki sought to overrule the jagged flux of her terrified mind. His eyes probed the depths of hers, seeking the source of her terror, and, then, like a rending tear, his mind's eye opened and viewed her soul as it struggled with a demon spirit. The snout of the fox-like face of the demon smiled back at him. A word tripped too swiftly across Vaylance's tongue, and in an instant the demon was off, leading Vaylance's soul on a merry chase through the many twistings and turnings of the maze of madness, its white plume of fox tail dipping and dodging. Vaylance gave up the chase as fruitless in a few

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moments, but it was already too late. His own soul was trapped in the never-ending tunnels of a tangled mind.

"I was a fool," he thought, "to think I could handle a madness like this with so little experience." The flat gray walls of the tunnel began to close in on him, and he felt panic rising in his soul, for he feared this time he was indeed lost to the eternal dream. In his fear he cried out, and suddenly there loomed up before him the bone-faced mask of the gray ghost stag with green fire playing through its antlers.

"Follow me," it said. "I will show you the source."

Vaylance followed the gaunt form obediently as it led deeper and deeper into the convoluted turnings of the crazed mind. Finally the corridor opened into a small room that must have been the center of the maze. There, at the middle, a huge stone crushed a small tree that attempted to reach around the boulder with branches grotesque and stunted. But the stone seemed to totally smother the young tree, repressing its natural upward growth, crushing the life out of it.

"Remove the stone," said the stag.

Vaylance placed his shoulder against the rock and pushed vigorously. On the third try, he dislodged it and the stone fell to the floor breaking in many shards.

Already the young tree appeared more alive. New shoots began to reach upwards and the crooked branches to straighten. It was still crooked in places, but a fine new trunk was rising where the stone had been. The gray ghost stag, trailing mist and grave-clothes, led him safely back through the maze, and he came to himself again where he knelt, staring into the lack-luster eyes of the mad girl, his hands on her head. He sang to her in the old language and felt the flow of her brain smooth out. The former jagged flux became calm as a pond with gliding swans. Finally he broke contact with his fingers and she slumped against him. He was untying her bonds when she awoke as from a restful sleep.

"Mother, Father, what is happening?" she asked.

Immediately the girl's mother was on her knees, hugging the girl to her breast.

"You might give her something to eat. I imagine she's hungry," said Vaylance, and thought of his own hunger. His veins ached hollowly and he wondered how long before his empty heart would cease to function and he would die "the dry death." Faintness dragged him down.

He was suddenly aware of Rimsky, kneeling beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders. "Simply amazing," said the doctor, "I would never have believed if I hadn't seen for myself."

Rimsky helped him up and he leaned on the doctor's strong arm all the way back to his bed. Rimsky took a panel screen and drew it around the bed to insure privacy.

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"Well, lad, I'm most indebted to you for what you did tonight. It seems there are things you can teach me and I was presumptuous to assume that your shamanism was a totally useless art."

"She is not totally healed yet," said Vaylance. "Now comes the talking cure where we must let her speak of her sorrows; then the rest is up to her whether she be healed or not."

"I'm so much in your debt," said Rimsky, "that I'm willing to pay the cost of such a healing." Saying this, he undid his cuff and rolled up his sleeve. "This is the accepted method of payment, is it not?" He offered his arm for Vaylance's inspection as any Tartar of the steppe.

Vaylance was filled with mistrust for a moment. Was Rimsky mocking his hunger, trying to lure him into betraying himself? He looked into the older man's eyes and saw fear. The arm fairly trembled. Rimsky was taking a great risk in trusting a suspected vampire.

To soothe the fear, Vaylance began to intone softly the gentle rhythm of the "sleeping song," but he did not let Rimsky slip into so deep a trance that he was unaware of what was happening.

"We do it like this," he said before slipping one of his long, thin incisor teeth into the proper vein. The juice of life flowed into him in waves, and he counted with heartbeats until his proper fee had been extracted, then withdrew and healed the wound with a swipe of his pink dog-like tongue.

"But how did you know what I was?" he asked of Rimsky.

"I didn't at first," said Rimsky, "but I remembered what an old Kalmuck servant of mine told me of another race that traded blood for healing. When I saw your tongue and fur and the gaps in your upper jaw for retractable teeth, I knew there must be some truth in it. But the medical prowess I had dismissed as so many tall tales. One always takes stories of miracles with a grain of salt."

"But what of the others?" asked Vaylance, attempting to peer around the screen.

"They must not know of your true nature, lad. There are too many of them with more imagination than brains. A 'vampire' among us could not be accepted. But your secret is safe with me, Vaylance. From what I've learned from my old servant, Subachi, your race is not evil, but really a very honest, fair-minded people, and your need for blood is much less than the mythical vampire."

Vaylance was overcome with emotion and didn't know what to say. Where he'd expected only fear and hatred, if discovered, he'd found a friend, who accepted him as he was without misunderstanding.

He told Rimsky about Rayorka and her blood-need.

"Few women survive puberty," he said, "but she must live, and others like her, for the sake of our race, or we will

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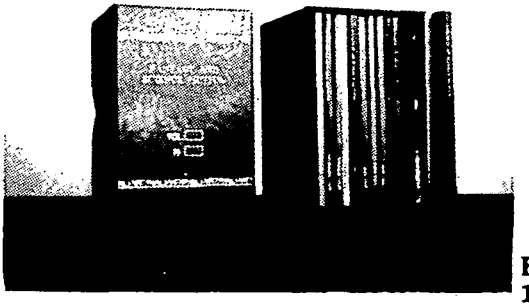
die out within a few generations."

"In that case, I shall entrust the fever bark to you with proper instructions. But promise you'll come back from time to time. I'm sure we could learn a lot from each other. You've certainly opened my eyes to the shamanistic way of healing."

"When my sister is well, I will come back," said Vaylance. "And if I come, will you teach me to read and write? I would like to write down the healing ways of my people, so that a whole world of wisdom will not pass away, if we should die out."

That very day Vaylance set out with a parcel of cinchona bark in his saddle bags. He urged his horse to travel swiftly, for he knew he carried life to the Nogais and to his sister.

Pausing for a brief moment to look back on the fort, he wiped his running nose on his jacket sleeve. His allergies would always plague him, he knew, but a certain healing had taken place inside his own soul. With Rimsky a whole other world of friendship had opened to him, and he knew he would be back soon.



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STAR STORIES

The death of childhood

They threaten her with exile now
that they've kidnapped her. The captain
throws her lions' gloves to his surly crew.
Daughter of ancient disciplines she remains
steadfast as a laser beam, cutting with nothing
but her heart the long path to their minds.

None of their tortures move her.
They despair, wanting not just cooperation
but her blind, unending love, as if
they were only children. The captain
stands her at the port where
they view her pearl-blue home.

"With one strike," he tells her,
"we'll split it open." But she can't
worship their groins and machines.
The stolen princess raises both hands,
palms facing, like a mother and father
saying farewell. It isn't quite the gesture
of *no weapons* they're used to, more like
an invisible child held in balance
between everyone's open hands.

The captain makes fists. He gives the order.
Violet light fans out in enormous waves
rocking the ship even at this distance.
Her planet's blown to bits that will circle
forever, a string of sand grains
expelled by the broken pearl.

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Your stars tomorrow

Among the suburban trees a few birds
settle into the lilac summer twilight.
No one would say it's dangerous here,
not the mother tucking her twins in
or the elder brother, the uncle,
planing a long board in the basement
where he's bricked in by imitation.

Slowly, we revolve all night lighted
on the other side by a single star
while hydrogen rampages through the universe.
No one dreams it's dangerous here,
not even when the massive fusion rises
in gold haze each morning, or
glitters at noon on glass ladders
where the Board of Directors climbs.

Three pages past the hysterical headlines
our horoscopes bridge toward tomorrow.
How could anyone think it's dangerous here
among our catalogues of stars and moons?
Nobody thinks of the flock of metal cigars
homing on lounge chairs in our green yards.

— SONYA DORMAN

Coming Next Month

"Documents in the Case of Elizabeth Akeley," is the title of the unusual feature story by Richard Lupoff. Also: Gardner Dozois, Greg Benford, Alan Dean Foster and others.

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Jones (not his real name) worked for a government agency that was successful in reducing taxes, interest rates and inflation. As you might suspect, the agency was innovative and really tough....

Blackmail

BY

GEORGE FLORANCE-GUTHRIDGE

Legless old geezer. Killing two kids like that.

Jones — not his real name; that was so lost among aliases he sometimes forgot it himself — glared down at the old man in the wheelchair. Cressno's face was pasty white, his head mottled with age spots; only a dirty-gray horseshoe remained of the hair. Fleshy, half-hooded eyes were buried behind glasses as thick as bottle caps. The old man fumbled beneath the blanket on his lap, lifted a wallet to his glasses, and, shaking uncontrollably, drew out and set down bills one at a time.

"I haven't got till Christmas, Cressno!" Jones snatched up the money.

The old man peered into the empty wallet. "You said twenty-five hundred. I had three thousand in here; everything I had left in the bank. What will I live on?"

Jones grabbed Cressno by the loose flesh beneath the chin. Cressno's head was lurched back, his glasses kicking up against his forehead. He gagged, his eyes bulged with fear. "Should have thought of that before you ran down that girl and the nigger on the Honda. Should have thought about a lot of things, you shriveled rooster."

"But I told you before. The brake didn't work," Cressno sputtered.

"Sure. That's why you never reported the accident." Jones let the head drop. His anger flared. He never had been able, as he'd been taught, to "stay cool, calm, and businesslike." He grabbed the blanket, shoved it against the old man's nose. "See this, rooster? Looks like a kilt, doesn't it! Well, I hope it reminds you. Kilt two kids not even halfway through high school." Laughing, he threw the blanket over Cressno's head.

Bowed, the blanketed figure sat

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with hands clasped as Jones walked away, Jones' reflection striding before him in the living room's polished, parquet floor. The French provincial furniture and oriental rugs were gone. Frightened about mortgage payments after Jones had arranged to have the house refinanced up to the eighty percent maximum the banks would allow, Cressno had shipped the stuff off to some rinky-dink auction house out in Gladstone before Jones could make better arrangements for a sale. Jones had hated to see the stuff go so cheaply, but there was nothing he could do about it now. "How will I eat?" the old man whimpered. And then: "Don't even have a goddamn television." Jones thought he heard sobbing. He hoped so. Fear and sorrow made people more pliable. He intended on upping the ante. No sense someone living in a house without furniture; the Organization would find a buyer for the place, and Jones would let Cressno keep half of the remaining twenty percent equity. For a time, anyway.

He arrived late at the office.

Cupid, his superior, was drumming her fingernails impatiently. Seated behind her desk in the dingy room in the aging Walcourt Building, she lifted a cup and said icily, "My third coffee, Jones. And I hate coffee." She raised a penciled brow.

He lowered himself into the room's only other chair and, his face hard, sat staring at her over steepled fingers. "I'm sorry. I'll try not to let it happen again." How much longer would he have to play the fool at these stupid meetings! He was going to make his money and get out. Three or four more years should do it. Three, he decided. With superiors like Cupid, he couldn't stand much more without going nuts. Until then? Maybe he'd get lucky, and she'd be kicked upstairs with the rest of those government yoyos. But the next person in charge of the Portland operation would probably be just as bad. "Had a pickup to make."

"This early?"

"Earlier. I stopped for breakfast afterward." Jones opened his briefcase and pitched a wad of bills onto her desk. "The old fart likes to get up with the chickens. I suppose he thinks it'll keep him wealthy and wise."

She frowned. "You've plotted his contribution?"

With a weary sigh Jones unfolded a large sheet of graph paper and, smoothing out the creases, handed it to her. Cupid the stupid. She and her idiotic optimum point. Government people were all alike; take and take and take, and attempt to justify their hands-in-the-pockets with a bunch of mathematics. Research each case carefully, he'd been told. We want to stretch people's budgets, not break them. *Get to the point!* had become a standard joke among the collection agents. Well, Cupid and the whole bunch of them could take that op-

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timum and stick it between their eyes. He'd pushed each optimum one and sometimes two graph-points further than he reported, and though there had been a lot of whining and wailing, none of the marks had climbed into any ovens to smell if the gas was on. They'd survive. And he'd survive — only much better. The difference between the optimum point he used and the one he turned in was gathering fat interest in a Swiss bank.

"I see you've projected the sale of Cressno's house. Did you take into account an eight percent commission for our salespeople?"

"Why do you think the curve bells out near the top?" Sarcasm seeped into his voice despite his restraint.

"Oh. I see." She refolded the paper and, tilting back in the chair, crossed her legs, lit a cigarette and blew a stream of smoke. "It all looks very, very good." True to form, as usual. He knew her act perfectly. When he arrived she was Lauren Bacall, businesswoman. Now she had slipped into her Bette Davis. Last and worst would come Karen Valentine, all gooey-eyed and hopeful. If he puked, would she consider it a form of applause?

"And now what's on your agenda?" she asked.

"Got three more pickups this morning. Then this afternoon I'll be busy filming."

"Anyone I know?"

Jones thumbed through his coded appointment calendar. "Silbury," he translated. "James T. Assistant superintendent of schools. He'll be taking his new secretary, a Ms. Judy Whatcom, to lunch. A very long lunch."

Gooey-eyed, Cupid leaned across the desk and gave him a conspiratorial grin. "Oh, I *do* know him! Of him, anyway. He's supposed to be a real family man. How did you *ever* find out?"

"You don't seem to understand. I didn't 'find out'; there's nothing to find out — yet. I'm creating. With Ms. Whatcom's help, that is."

"You mean...?"

"Our Mr. Silbury is your typical middle-aged, upper middle-class, overweight bozo with a possessive wife, three cars, and an overinflated house. Judy Whatcom is two years out of business college and could screw the stripes off a zebra. Do you really think she'd wind up in some cheap hotel in the hope that her boss would dump his old lady and come running, alimony payments and all?" Jones stuck the graph paper back in the briefcase. "Once I set up the operation on Silbury, I'll see about getting our money back from Ms. Whatcom, with interest. I've got a couple of things on her, too."

"But what you're doing with Silbury is entrapment!"

"And I suppose blackmail is alms for the poor. Besides, it was your predecessor's idea. Digging up a person's past is too time-consuming and therefore expensive, he used to say; creating

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the future is much more cost-effective." Her predecessor, a bald toad with the incredible code name of Gleanglum, hadn't said anything of the sort; only thought he had. A suggestion here, a dropped hint there, and suddenly Jones' idea of how to eliminate false leads, especially leads on people whose apparent wealth turned out to be facade, had the chance of becoming SOP. Three years left. He had to make them as profitable as possible. "Didn't he tell you?"

For a moment she seemed to hang between puzzlement and anger. Then, "Oh. Certainly. Good idea." She sat back and became Bette Davis again.

Government people. They made him sick. One hand never knew or cared what the other was doing. Things had been so much simpler during the first year of the blackmailing operation. The Organization had run it from top to bottom. Scuttlebutt insisted it was a contract job for the government; some new sub-branch of the IRS. But like any good soldier in the Organization — "good" meaning ones who liked living — he kept his mouth shut and did his job. Then the government apparently decided it couldn't keep its bureaucratic hands out of a good thing. He found himself being referred to as an agent. Overseers who obviously were not members of the Organization were brought in. Then there were overseers to oversee the overseers. And what irked him most, they *posed* as Organization people. That way he'd keep following orders. Or so the theory went. Maybe the other agents were fooled, but he wasn't. If idiots like Cupid had been Organization members, they'd long ago have taken a midnight swim in concrete shoes.

"Well, let's get on about our work," she said, shooing him toward the door with a flutter of her hand.

Three years. One hundred and fifty-six weekly idiot-sessions. With people like her running the operation, it was about as likely to see the end of the century as he was of playing in the NBA. He didn't intend to be around when things hit the fan. She'd still be locked in the government cogs, shuffling papers and her feet and praying to move from a GS-7 to a GS-8; that raise would mean an extra trip to the beauty salon once every six months and, if she scrimped, maybe that new Lazyboy rocker hubby kept mentioning. Well, he'd be at the Riviera. Or in Rio. Anywhere where sand was white, woman-flesh brown and ripe for the purchase, and IRS meant "in restful sleep."

"Quickly, now." Another hand flutter.

"Right."

A ticket lay against his cracked windshield. Citation for a Citation; he wondered if the metermaids ever realized the irony. He rubbed out the penciling and stuck the ticket on the next car; no sense cheating city hall out of

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necessary income. Then, ramming his car into gear, he scraped the next bumper and moved out among the Burnside traffic. Someday he'd have a car befitting his station. Maybe one of those new electric Rolls everyone was raving about.

At the beginning of his second year of collections, he and the other soldiers had been told to "drive something late-model; something small and inconspicuous." Why in hell should he do that? Who was more frightening to the marks — some scab driving a junker and wearing worn-heeled shoes, or someone cruising in a Lincoln and sporting (to complete the image) an immaculate pinstripe suit? But word had come down: the operation was to be low-keyed. No apparent connections, either actual or imagistic, with organized crime. That's when he'd first begun to suspect the operation was no longer strictly an Organization contract-job. The government was afraid of being caught with dirty hands.

Suddenly many things had begun making sense to him. The government's new hold-the-line attitude toward taxes, in spite of the economic rebuilding after the Great Recession of '85 and the recent upsurge in defense spending and HEW appropriations. The decline in inflation and interest rates. The much-discussed rise in church attendance. The government had more money to spend, its citizens less. A whole lot less. And in a perverse way, maybe people were happier. Taxes robbed the wallet for the Common Good. Blackmail had more immediate and personal benefits.

Maybe some egghead in a government think-tank had dreamed up the scam. Maybe some congressman while he was in bed with his secretary or valet. Jones wondered if that person had foreseen how extensive and effective the thing would become. Or envisioned one of its most interesting ramifications: reduced court dockets had allowed the legal system almost to catch up with the backlog. And people with money might not go to prison, but they certainly paid for their crimes.

An excellent system. If only it was turned back over to topnotch people. People like himself. But, no, the Cupids and Gleanglums had to ruin things. Well, in three more years the only government he'd be concerned with was the one whose laws caused the sun to shine and waves to lap against resort beaches. He'd stay squeaky clean until then, even if the government couldn't. Maybe it was natural that government grew dirtier the larger it became; a stinking, corpulent beast wallowing in filth, releasing dirt like shirts seen in close-up in a laundry commercial. So who had the right to condemn if he skimmed a little scum off the surface? In the meantime, he'd play the game, not arouse suspicion. A cheap brownstone apartment, quiet evenings with Mantovani and Purcell, sometimes a Saturday-night screw from his landlady. If he took a

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fall, he'd take flight — to Switzerland. Not like that simpleton Rasmeer, who started shooting off his mouth despite the best efforts of certain in-the-know members of the Portland PD. The agent had suddenly discovered that mixed drinks can lead to terrible hangovers. Especially if one of the drinks is mixed with strychnine.

He always enjoyed making a pick-up from Sally Kelly.

She had been beautiful, once.

He wheeled beneath the arched, iron latticework of The Restful Dell by the River. A narrow blacktopped lane meandered among the graves. One Way, an arrow-shaped sign told him. One way in and no way out, if you're unlucky. Well, the meeting sites the marks chose was their business; he gave them that concession, anyway. Sally Kelly's choices, however, were a little strange even by his standards. A different cemetery for each payoff. A couple of mourners glanced up from a graveside service as Jones drove by. He wagged his fingers hello.

She was standing beside a Douglas fir in the newest section, the jacket of her blue pantsuit flapping lightly in the wind coming up the gentle slope from the Willamette. In her matching hat and the veil she reminded him of Jackie Kennedy the day they buried Jack. Tall, serene, stunning legs. Sally Kelly: the well-dressed blackmail victim, working hard to blend in with the surroundings. She had worn the veil to the payoffs even before some weirdo had gagged her, tied her spread-eagled to a hotel bed, and methodically carved up her face with a razorblade.

Jones parked and crossed the mounds. The shrubs were spindly seedlings bowing in the breeze, but the evergreens were lovely. The sod on the graves, not yet settled, was cracked at the seams. Perhaps the dead were still kicking.

"You're looking well," he said.

"The hell I am." She hitched up the strap of her handbag. Her arm stuck away from her side slightly, as if the bag impeded her from holding the arm correctly. The elbow hadn't set right after he'd broken it. The break had been her own fault. She had balked about her second payment — that was when money had been much harder to obtain, before she'd gone to work at the Palace. He'd been faced with either exposing her secret or twisting her arm. The former, Gleanglum had decided, wasn't cost-effective.

She turned away, toward the river. "Last night a group of boys came into the hotel. You know, roughnecking. Wanted to see what a Pleasure Palace looked like. Fool that I am, I opened the door to see what the commotion was. Real pro, huh? Before the manager could throw them out, they saw me. Three of them...." She made a little choking sound. "Three of them were my students."

"Maybe they didn't recognize you."

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"With my face? Kelly Carver, they call me. Kelly Carver, standing there wearing leather garters and nipple rings."

"Oh, screw the kids," he said. "They won't say anything."

"I did. And they won't ... for now. But they'll just keep coming back. Back and back and back. Just like you. Then the truth will get out anyway, and I'll lose my teaching credentials."

"So what if they do tell? Work at the Palace full-time."

"I'm not going back there. Not for you. Not for anyone."

She shuddered when he put his hands on her shoulders. "Just a couple more payments. Then our little matter will be settled once and for all. You wouldn't want people to find out about your father. And don't think for a moment the courts will forget about the escape just because he's been a good boy for thirty years. There're no pardons for cop killers."

She gave a slight nod. A nod of defeat. She sighed, then took a pack of bills from her purse and, without turning, dropped them behind her on the ground. The money was rubber-banded and neatly wrapped in cellophane. Gladwrap, she had told him once. Jones stooped to pick up the bundle. Maybe the whole thing was a game with her, he thought, albeit an ugly one. A true masochist.

He looked up into the barrel of a .38 Smith and Wesson.

"I am not going back." She spoke slowly and articulately even though she was trembling so much the gun was wavering before his eyes.

He stayed in the crouch, his hand around the money. Play it cool. Calm. Businesslike. "I would suggest," he said, forcing a smile, "you put that thing away. Pull the trigger, and you'll be working in places like the Palace the rest of your life. There are people who know where I am every minute of the day. Who I'm seeing. And why."

The gun faltered. Then she turned it upward, toward her face.

"Oh, my god," he blurted out.

The instant he lunged for the gun he knew the move was a mistake. Perhaps he did it because she had once been beautiful. Or because a death was so cost-ineffective. The .38 exploded. She crumpled, and he was still holding her hand, and the gun. He felt his soul freeze.

He had heard the clicking of a camera.

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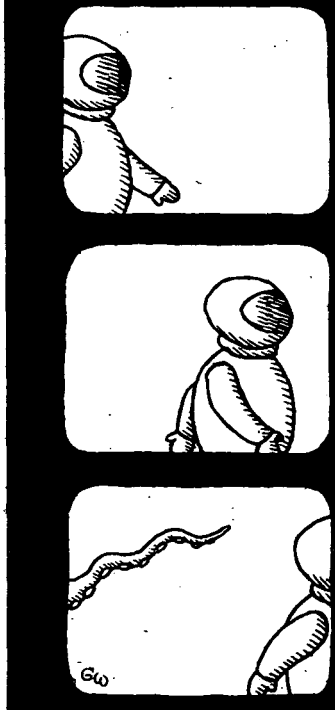
Films

BAIRD SEARLES



Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE CROWBAR IN THE CONCRETE

The very day that I was forced up against television's latest bout with fantasy, I happened to finish reading what may be the maddest literary Arthurian spinoff yet, Joan Aiken's *The Stolen Lake*. It makes White's *The Once and Future King* and Mitchison's *To the Chapel Perilous*, both pretty dizzy, look positively sobersided. With this kind of a standard set, there is no way in the world that a dumb TV comedy series built around the idea of Merlin being alive and well in San Francisco and taking on a new apprentice is going to amuse me. Right?

Not quite. *Mr. Merlin* is not bad. Not very good, mind you, but not bad. Not insulting to the intelligence or the fantasy material. And not overly cute, coy, or whimsical, all qualities that the purveyors of mass market fantasy (Disney et al.) deem necessary for the public to accept it. (This, by the way, is based on only the first episode; series have been known to change quality drastically after their debuts.)

The first episode introduced us to Max Merlin, who runs a garage in San Francisco (why San Francisco? — its fey reputation, maybe?), Alexandria, a lady whose taste in clothing runs to white, white, and white, including a stunningly snowy fireman's outfit at one point, and Zach, the 15-year-old apprentice to be, who enters the garage on a skateboard, falls off and in doing

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so, practically demolishes the joint.

Earlier, Merlin had complained to Alexandria, who seems to be a sort of delivery girl for the Powers Above, that in the good old days a man could prove himself special by pulling a sword from a stone, but nowadays, what do They give him but a crowbar set in concrete.

And so Zach, in trying to repair the damage he has wrought, pulls the crowbar from the concrete, and *voila!* — Merlin has found a new Arthur.

From there on, it's classic sorcerer's apprentice time, a theme that, despite its antiquity, can still be excruciatingly funny. Who can forget Harold Shea, in what might be its first modern manifestation, De Camp and Pratt's *The Incomplete Enchanter*, misplacing a decimal point in his magical calculations and conjuring up 100 herbiverous dragons?

Mr. Merlin never quite achieved that height, but came close when Zach and his friend slip a love potion into their dates' champagne, which then turns pink, starts to steam, bubble and froth (at which point a passing woman says to her escort, "I'm glad we didn't order *that*") and soon buries the entire restaurant in an avalanche of pink foam.

The ending was a bit sticky; when Zach admits to having initiated the detergent deluge, it goes back to where ever it came from and he wins his job and his spurs. But Barnard Hughes is nicely acerbic as Mr. M.; Clark Brandon is so naive as Zach that he seems to be a leftover from *Leave It To Beaver*, but that's almost a relief after all the smartass TV kids of the past decade; and Elaine Joyce, indistinguishable from all those other blonde, busomy, toothy ladies, wears white as well as Alexandria. (Since *Charlie's Angels*, I've felt we should revive the old expression *boob tube.*)

To reiterate, *Mr. Merlin* is nothing earth-shaking, but its heart is in the right place and it made me laugh a couple of times. Besides, a show that dislikes gum-cracking enough to send a female practitioner of same soaring over the hills of San Francisco dangling by her mouth from a huge gum bubble can't be a total loss.

The other matter to mention this month is also concerned with ancient magic loose in the modern world, but it's a very different cup of tea. I had missed the 1977 Australian film, *The Last Wave*, when it was first released, and caught up with it recently on television. This means that I *may* have seen something different from what those who saw it in a theatre had seen, but since there was no notice of editing for television, I feel fairly sure I can talk about it without apologies.

It's really another old theme, modern man mystically involved in magic from the past; this dates at least as far back as Haggard's *She*. In *The Last Wave*, it's a young Australian lawyer defending a group of aborigines charged with murder. It seems that they kill-

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ed the victim because he had tampered with their sacred objects. It also seems that the lawyer is the incarnation of a sort of spirit whose appearance heralds the end of a cycle, an end traditionally brought about by great natural disasters.

The story is told with the kind of fragmentary visual incoherence I associate with Nicholas Roeg (*The Man Who Fell To Earth, Don't Look Back*). And it is the *wettest* movie. Almost every scene is in the rain, or there is water coming at you from somewhere. When it got to a stopped bathtub pouring water down the stairs, I'm afraid all I could think of was the equally silly mashed potatoes in *Close Encounters*. The moisture, of course, is a precursor of the disaster to come.

Nevertheless, I enjoyed the film. Because of the style and the exotic nature of the magic, I was never involved, or every really believed what I was seeing (the true test of a fantasy film), but I was held by the unclichéd view of Australia and the Australians (not a kangaroo or a Waltzing Matilda to be seen or heard), especially the aborigines and their beliefs, and the fact that many individual scenes were well photographed, written, and acted. Not to mention the persistent curiosity as to where the next bucketful of water was coming from.

New on videotape.... The Day the Earth Caught Fire, a neat little British film from 1961, set in London after the Earth is thrown off orbit toward the sun. It's not well enough known, and worth a day's rental.

WE TURNED DOWN THE STORY BUT COULDN'T RESIST THE COVERING LETTER

Dear Ed,

I just zipped up to 1985 the other day, and found this story in an anthology — under my own name, too, curiously enough. Well, I liked it and decided to plagiarize myself. So I xeroxed the tale (superb office machines upwhen, by the way) and zipped back down to old '81 and now I'm sending it out to you. It first appeared in FSF, you know, according to the credits in the antho, and I assume neither of us would dare violate the proverbial Time-Space Continuum.

—JAMES ELLIOT

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Phyllis Eisenstein, whose new novel, IN THE HANDS OF GLORY, was recently published by Timescape, returns with a fascinating tale about a successful young career woman and her search for what is quite literally the man of her dreams.

Nightlife

BY

PHYLLIS EISENSTEIN

Lightning had struck, canceling out her power of flight, and she was falling, falling through the cloudless sky. Like a steel bar it had slammed her, making her body ring as if she, too, were made of metal. There was no pain, but all she could see and hear and think was that strident, demanding sound. With both hands, she tried to blot it out as the desert rushed upward. At the last instant, she saw her shadow bloom from a pinpoint on the sand to a great black mouth that reached out to swallow her.

Jane Bentley rolled over and groped for the alarm. Someday she would buy a clock radio; she kept promising herself that, every time the bone-jarring bell spoiled her dreams. She yawned and stretched, remembering the scenario with a smile. Super powers again — deeds of strength done in secret, rescued people never knowing whom to thank, and then the long, wingless sail through space and sea and sky, like swimming underwater with never a need for breath. Even the final fall could not dampen her lingering sense of exhilaration. As a child she would have awakened sweating and shaking, grasping the blankets in an effort to brake that terrible descent. But at thirty-two Jane Bentley had long since come to terms with her dreams.

Her waking life she saw as prosaic, though some people would have envied it. By external appearance, she was a successful, career-oriented young woman, upwardly mobile. Her title was Account Executive, and she collected a fat salary from a multimillion-dollar Chicago insurance company for being bright, efficient, and charming. She wore the right clothes, spoke the right words, smiled the right smile. Her co-workers liked and re-

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spected her; her superiors raised her salary regularly. She had worked hard to become the person she seemed, and she had reaped rewards along the way — a luxury condominium, jewelry, travel, all the creature comforts. But none of it *touched* her. She was satisfied with her days, but not happy with them.

This day was much like all the others. She showered and dressed quickly, grabbed a cup of coffee, and dashed for her train. She read a newspaper on the way downtown, absorbed what seemed important in it, and tossed it away on entering her office. The phone rang almost as soon as she sat down. She spent the morning dealing with people in a clear, smooth voice, offering suggestions, alternatives, guidelines. She dictated a few letters for her secretary before going to a business lunch that occupied half the afternoon. With the meal, she drank the sparkling water that had recently become so popular with rising young executives, and she returned to the office sober and ready to tie up all the loose ends on her desk. She hated to leave work unfinished, though she never stayed late to do it and never took any home with her. Toward 4:30, the man in the next office stopped by to ask her out for dinner; he was pleasant, nice-looking, divorced, and uninteresting. As always, Jane said no. At five o'clock she went home.

She was a good cook, treating cooking, like everything else she did, with the time and care necessary for superior results. She ate her lavish evening meal in front of the television set, watching an in-depth news show on the public station. After washing and drying the dishes and laying out her clothes for the next day, she went to bed. It was eight o'clock. She always went to bed at eight o'clock, if not earlier. Rather than spend an evening with the executive from the next office, rather than play bridge with the neighbors, rather than watch the late movie, she slept ten, eleven, twelve hours a night. And dreamed.

She closed her eyes and willed her muscles to relax, clearing her mind of the day's complexities. They were as trivial as a crossword puzzle and just as dull — merely a way to pass the time and be well-paid for it. Dreams were more real to Jane than reality, more gripping, sharper, brighter. And so she slept as much as possible, luring them to her with an open, eager mind. Any cue could spur them. Thinking of last night's dream as she drifted off could bring a continuation of it, a second episode in a convoluted adventure that might take weeks to spin itself out, night after night. Or she could contemplate a fresh set of elements, perhaps the Arctic, Eskimos, dogsleds, furs, and gold buried under the mountains east of Nome. She pulled the covers closer to her throat; the evening was too cool for wintry thoughts. She preferred the desert just now, and the sand blazing hot under the high sun. The

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desert, cactus, cholla, yucca, and the horizon infinitely far away under the crystalline blue sky.

She had fallen, she knew, out of that empty sky. She lay sprawled on the ground, pinned there by heat. Her fingers closed on alkali sand, and sunlight seared so bright through her closed eyelids that she dared not open them. She tried to roll over, but there was a lethargy upon her, and she could barely turn her head. Lightning had drained her muscles of more than their superhuman strength. She rested, gasping at the baking air, feeling moisture being pulled from her lungs with every breath.

At last she tried again, and with an effort that stabbed her chest and made her sinews cry out she wrenched herself up on one elbow, one hip, and let her head hang down. Her hair swung forward, a dark curtain about her face, and so she was able to open her eyes finally and look out at her sandy prison. It rolled outward in all directions, an undulating landscape scattered with scrub, and in the distance were purple mountains that might have been real, or clouds, or just mirage. Whatever they were, they looked a thousand miles away. Jane pushed herself to her knees and then, unsteadily, to her feet. She was dressed for the desert — boots, jeans, long-sleeved shirt, sombrero hanging down her back; she pulled the hat up on her head and began to trudge toward the mountains.

She had walked forever, or maybe just a few minutes, when she saw the riders. Distance and perspective baffled her in that sun-scorched endlessness, and at first she thought they were grasshoppers, jack rabbits, coyotes, anything but men on horseback. Their images rippled and danced with heat shimmer. And then they turned toward her. The man in the lead waved.

She stood still as they approached, trying not to sway with the weariness that dragged at her. They shouted, but she could not make out the words until they had stopped around her and swung down from their mounts. And then it was a jumble of voices, all wanting to know how she had gotten out there, so far from everywhere. She had no answer for that, no answer she cared to give, and her lips were too weak to form one anyway. She stared at them, a dozen men or so, mostly looking like they had been out in the desert too many years. Their clothes were sweat-stained and grimy, their beards weeks grown out, their eyes red-rimmed and tired. They stood as if carrying heavy packs on their shoulders, and when they spoke, their voices were as dusty as their wind- and sun-burned faces.

All but one.

He was young, barely more than a boy, and his eyes were bright and sharp and a startling blue in his pale face. He was tall and carried himself very straight, and either he shaved regularly or didn't yet need to. His voice

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was a high, sweet tenor, rising clearly above the rest.

He was very young, but it was to him that Jane looked. The other men seemed somehow out of focus. And it was he who stepped forward to catch her when her legs buckled, lifting her with one arm beneath her shoulders and one behind her knees as the other men crowded around and stared.

"Don't be frightened, ma'am," he said softly. "You're among friends."

She let her head rest on his shoulder, her eyes half-closed. She could feel the young, corded muscles beneath his flannel shirt as he carried her effortlessly, as he lifted her to his saddle. He climbed up behind her and held her securely against him as he nudged the horse to a trot. Jane hardly felt the motion; his arms seemed a cushion that transformed the horse into a boat gliding on calm waters. The desert receded, the heat and light and sand melting away for some timeless time. And looming before her eyes, his profile was clean, almost delicate, with the beauty of the last flush of youth.

At last a box canyon coalesced before them, and they moved down into it. On the canyon rim, two sentries waved their rifles, to let the dozen riders pass.

It was an elaborate encampment. On one side, a large corral held a few horses; on the other, a cluster of ramshackle cabins crowded against the canyon wall. After tethering their mounts, the riders scattered, except for the boy and one other. The boy took Jane down from his horse and carried her into one of the cabins; the other man followed.

The interior of the cabin was divided into two rooms — eating space in the front and a small bedroom, shut off by a thin door, in the back. She had expected sleeping bags on the floor, or perhaps rough bunks against a wall, and indeed there was a bedroll beside the table in the main room. But the back room held a real bed with steel frame, springs, and a firm, sheet-covered mattress. The boy set her on it.

"You'll be all right now," he said, pulling her boots off. "You just need some rest." He smiled and patted her shoulder lightly. "Don't you worry ma'am. We'll look after you." He turned away.

She tried to reach out with one hand, but she could barely raise it. "Please don't go," she whispered.

He looked back from the doorway. "We'll just be out here, me and Bob. Fixing some dinner. You hungry?"

She shook her head.

"Well, we'll leave the door open, and maybe when you smell it cooking, you'll change your mind."

"Stay with me," she whispered. "Just a minute."

He hesitated, then came back to the bed. In the space beside her hip, he sat down gingerly. "Is there something I can do for you, ma'am?"

She smiled. He was easy to smile at, his open, boyish face bending over

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her. "No," she said. "I just wanted to say ... thank you."

He smiled back at her, and his hand moved to cover hers, to squeeze it briefly. "No need for thanks, ma'am. Anybody would have picked up a loner in the desert. Wouldn't be human not to."

"What is this place?" she asked.

He shrugged. "Noplace. Just where we live. It hasn't got any name."

"Do you?"

"You can call me Jack."

"Jack. I'm Jane Bentley."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Jane."

His friend Bob leaned in through the doorway. "You gonna jaw with the lady or cook us some dinner?"

Jack stood up. "My turn to fix the food," he said apologetically. "Be right there, Bob." He looked down at Jane for a moment. "Don't you fret, Miss Jane. You're safe here."

He went out, and she dozed for a time. When she opened her eyes again, he was sitting on the edge of the bed, a bowl and spoon in his hands. The room was full of the smell of cooked meat.

"Maybe you want some stew?" he said, offering the bowl. "It's good."

She sighed. Her whole body seemed made of lead. "I'm too tired to eat," she said. "Maybe later."

"Let me help you." He propped her up with extra pillows, and he fed her, spoonful by spoonful, until the contents of the bowl were in her stomach. "I know that'll help you feel better," he said.

She smiled. "It was very good."

"The cook thanks you, ma'am. Nothing like red meat to get the blood moving again. You'll be up and about in no time."

"I hope so."

"You get some rest now, ma'am. A good night's sleep'll make a world of difference to you. And if you want anything, don't be afraid to call; Bob and I'll be right in the other room."

"Thank you," she whispered.

When he was gone, she turned her face to the small window, where she could see the red of sunset reflected on the canyon wall. Scarcely a moment seemed to pass before it turned to morning sunlight and she was blinking sleep-gritty eyes against the brightness. She raised a hand to rub at them and was surprised at the ease of that movement. She flexed her fingers — still weak, but not the bone-deep weakness of before.

The door opened, and Jack came in with a bowl of stew. "Sorry we can't offer you a proper breakfast, Miss Jane," he said, "but we run out of bacon and laying hens a few months back." He sat on the bed and watched her feed herself. "See, your strength's coming back, just like I said it would. Why, pretty soon you'll be good as new."

She smiled. "I do feel better today."

He took the bowl when she was finished, set it on the floor. "You know, we're all pretty curious about you, ma'am. What were you doing out in

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the desert all alone? You're not from these parts — we know that."

"No, I'm not," she said, manufacturing a quick lie. "I'm from the East. From Baltimore."

"Baltimore?"

"I work for the Baltimore *Sun*. That's a newspaper. I came out West to write a series of articles on local heroes."

"Heroes? Precious few heroes around *here*." He shook his head slowly. "I'm amazed, ma'am; I'm truly amazed. This is tough country for an Easterner. Specially a woman."

"So I discovered. My horse was frightened by a rattlesnake and threw me. I don't think it was actually bitten, but it did run off before I could pick myself up."

"Where were you going, ma'am? And where were you coming from? I don't know how long you were walking, but you didn't seem to be on the way to anywhere."

"Well, I *had* a map," she said. And then she shrugged. "But I guess I got lost pretty early on. I certainly don't know where I am now." She grinned at him. "But I must have been on the way to somewhere, or you wouldn't have found me."

"We were coming here, but that's nowhere sure enough. It wouldn't have been on your map." He stared at her for a long moment, and finally he chuckled and said, "The Baltimore *Sun*. Well, don't that beat all."

"Now you know about me," she said. "What about you?"

"Oh, nothing so glamorous, Miss Jane. We're just prospectors. Old silver mines hereabouts, you know. Worked by the Indians, and the Spaniards after them. We're looking for gold, too, though we haven't found any yet."

She looked into his bright blue eyes and knew that his story was a lie, a cover for something else, and she wondered if he had understood the same about hers. "Am I keeping you from work?" she said. "I wouldn't want to inconvenience you."

"No, ma'am, that doesn't matter. I don't have to work if I don't want to. I'm just as happy setting here and passing the time with you."

"Everyone else is gone then?"

"Well, no." He waved a hand negligently. "I guess it's just not a working day today. Not mining work, anyway. They're fixing things — saddles and gear. It's got to get done sometime."

"They're not staying because of *me*, are they?"

"Oh, no, ma'am, don't feel that way."

"I don't want to be a burden to you all. I'll be well soon, I know."

"Sure you will. And in a few days we'll ride you down to the stage line and send you on to Tucson. You can go near anyplace from there. Looking for your heroes."

She nodded. "I'd be much obliged." It came to her then, the truth behind the lie. They were searching for gold and silver all right, but they found it

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on the Wells Fargo stage. The others fit that mold — desperate men hiding in a desperate land. But Jack seemed young and fresh and innocent for an outlaw.

The brief silence that had fallen over them seemed to make him uncomfortable, and at last he stood up. "Can I get you something? Some more stew? There's still plenty."

"No, thank you. But you could give me an arm to lean on. I'd like to get up."

"You're sure you feel strong enough?"

"I don't know. Won't know till I try, will I?" She reached out to him with both hands, and he caught them firmly. She stood, though her knees shook. "I certainly did a lot of walking yesterday. It must have been a thousand miles, the way my muscles feel."

"Steady," he said.

"I could use a pair of crutches. But you'll just have to do for now." She took a step and then another. She swayed.

"Careful," he said, loosing her hands to slide a supporting arm around her shoulders. "Don't push yourself so hard right away."

"I feel foolish." She let herself lean against him. "Helpless. I'm not used to that."

"Give it some time, Miss Jane. Don't be so impatient."

She looked up into his face. "I'm afraid I haven't any patience at all." She raised her fingers around the back of his neck and pulled his head down for a kiss. It was a light kiss, just a feathery brushing of lips, and he pulled away first.

"You must be tired," he said.

She rested her head against his shoulder, nodding.

"Maybe you'd better lie down." He lifted her easily and carried her the two steps to the bed. When she would have clung to him, he peeled her arms away gently. He smiled hesitantly then kissed her forehead. "There are things I have to do. You'll be all right while I'm gone."

"Must you go?" she murmured.

"Yes."

"Will you be gone long?"

"No, not long." He stepped away from the bed. "You'll be all right."

After he left she turned her face to the window, though there was nothing to see there but shadow on the canyon wall. She closed her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them, the window had tripled in size and acquired blue curtains. She had awakened ten minutes before the alarm went off.

In the shower, she tried to think of where she might have seen Jack before. He wasn't a movie star or a co-worker, nor a neighbor, she was sure of that. A fellow commuter perhaps? She watched for his face as she went to work, watched the train and the streets, the elevator and the corridors, but she couldn't find him. Even though he was as clear and crisp in her memory as the man in the next office, she couldn't place him, not even as a composite of

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more than one person.

The business day flowed by with its usual demands that Jane handled with her usual competence. But in the back of her mind, through the hours, the desert burned, waiting. As she settled down for sleep that evening, she tried to hold the whole of the night before in her mind — the box canyon, the tumble-down cabin, and Jack. Above all, Jack.

She became aware of the mattress first, firmer than her own, and then the tiny room came into focus around her. The light beyond the window was ruddy — sunset. She sat up and flexed her muscles. She felt well, strong. She stood and walked without difficulty. She gripped the steel frame of the bed and tried to dent it with her fingers, but it resisted. Strong she was, as strong as an ordinary human being, but not herself yet. She wondered if she ever would be again. How powerful was lightning?

Behind her, the door opened, and she swung around abruptly to see Jack enter. Tall and lean, he walked with easy grace, almost like a dancer. Three paces into the room he stopped and looked at her intently, his expression — wary? Then he smiled slightly. "You must be feeling better."

"I am."

He shut the door firmly. "I want to talk to you," he said. "Sit down."

She sat on the bed and patted the space beside her. "You too."

He ignored the invitation and stood in front of her, just out of reach. He folded his hands across his chest. "Jane Bentley," he said, "who are you?"

She frowned. "Haven't we been through this already?"

"I don't think so. I think this Baltimore *Sun* business is nothing more than an invention."

"You mean, like your gold and silver prospecting?"

His eyes narrowed. "What do you want here?"

She leaned back on her arms. "What would you have me want, Jack?"

He pointed one finger at her. "Look here, Miss Jane — there are *fourteen armed men out there*, and they're beginning to wonder why a lone woman was wandering around so close to this camp."

"But I told you that."

"Oh, I know what you *told* me. But that doesn't mean they believe it."

"Do you?"

He dropped his hand. "I don't think so."

"Then why do you think I'm here?"

He shook his head. "Damned if I know, ma'am. I just know that you're as likely to get your head blown off real soon as anything else."

"Touchy bunch, aren't you? You make a habit of killing unarmed women?"

"Unarmed women don't make a habit of looking for us."

"I wasn't looking for you, Jack." She smiled slowly. "But now that I've

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found you, I don't mind saying that I'm glad I did."

He turned away sharply, and his back was rigid. "I'm trying to help you, Miss Jane," he said in a low voice, "if there's some reason for it."

She walked up behind him and ran her hand up his spine to his neck. She stroked the skin just beneath his hairline. "I'm truly amazed that fourteen armed men are afraid of little me. Or is it just you that's afraid, Jack?"

He turned slowly, and when she saw his face, it was very pale, the brilliant eyes huge. He gripped her shoulders, his fingers curling into the flesh so hard that they would have hurt an ordinary woman. "Yes," he said very softly. "I'm afraid."

"Oh, don't be," she whispered, reaching up to him.

He broke away, thrust her from him. "I can't protect you if I don't know who you are."

"I'm only what I seem."

"Then," he said, "... what do you *seem?*" At his sides his hands formed fists. "I wish I could make up my mind." He stared at her a long moment. "I don't think I've ever met anyone like you before," he said at last.

She smiled. "I'd like to think not."

He shook his head. "It's a game we're playing, you know. *Do* you know?"

"Everything's a game, Jack, isn't it?"

"I wish you'd give me a straight answer."

"But I have."

He reached for the door. "I'll see you in the morning; we can talk again then."

"We could talk now just as well."

"We could, but I need to think. Nothing's simple, Miss Jane."

"I'm sorry if I've made things complicated for you. I didn't mean to, believe me."

He nodded and went out.

She lay down on the bed and waited as darkness fell. She thought of his fine-chiseled face and of the feel of his muscles beneath the flannel shirt and of the heat his flesh seemed to generate. But in the darkness, when the bedroom door opened, it was someone else who came to her, who stood over the bed reeking of liquor. By moonlight reflected from the canyon wall, she recognized Bob, Jack's cabin mate. She opened her mouth to speak, and he clamped a hard palm across it. His weight came down on her, heavy and suffocating; he scrabbled at the waist of her jeans. She gripped his wrist with both hands and thrust upward, but she was too weak to peel that calloused gag away. She rolled him off the bed, though, and they thumped to the floor with Jane uppermost, all elbows and knees and anger. He laughed and jerked her sideways, slamming her head against the floor. *Lightning,* she thought, as the room swam around her.

And then Jack's voice came to her. He was cursing, and his hands were

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ripping Bob away and flinging him across the room. They fought, tall man against short, sober against drunk, a fight punctuated by grunts and by the crunch of bone and tooth and cartilage. It ended with the younger, lighter one the victor, tossing Bob out of the cabin.

He knelt beside Jane. "Did he hurt you?"

She blinked hard and focused on him. The room settled down. "Just a few bruises," she said. "And a bump on the head."

"Damn him." Gently he lifted her to the bed and gently lowered her head to the pillow. "I should have known. I should have kicked him out as soon as we brought you here."

"He was your friend, wasn't he? You couldn't very well kick a friend out."

"We worked together. Friend is too strong a word. But women make a man peculiar."

She smiled weakly. "I suppose that's true. And *vice versa.*"

"Bump on your head, you said — shall I get you a cold cloth for it?"

"Now where would you find a cold cloth around here?"

"There's a spring at the foot of the canyon." He straightened up, but before he could take a step, she clutched at his arm.

"No, don't go. It doesn't hurt."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's nothing. Please don't leave."

He sat down on the edge of the bed and patted the hand that held him. "Are you afraid?"

She looked at him for a long moment. By moonlight his face was luminous, a lock of pale hair hanging down over his eyes. Yes, a beautiful face; the word handsome wasn't appropriate at all. "We're all afraid of something," she said.

"The door has a lock on the inside."

"That wouldn't matter if someone really wanted to get in."

"I don't think you have to worry about that. The others won't let Bob come back — they'll be too jealous-angry that he tried to do what they agreed not to."

"They agreed not to rape me?"

"It would be poor hospitality to save your life and then rape you, don't you think?"

"Except Bob didn't see it that way."

"He'd been drinking. And he was here, in the cabin. Too close." He shook his head sharply. "I should have seen it."

Jane let her fingers curl into his sleeve. "And what about you? You're right here. Aren't the others jealous of you?"

"I'm not doing anything to be jealous of."

"No, I suppose not." She slid her fingers up his arm. "Not for lack of encouragement, though."

He looked down at her hand. "They all know they can come in here any time."

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"Well ... that would lend things a certain ... spice."

He pulled away from her and stood up. "Who are you?" he whispered. "Tell me straight. I have to know."

She looked up at him, puzzled at the sudden tension in his voice. "You keep asking me that. You haven't believed anything I've said, have you?"

"I don't know what to believe. I want to have something to believe."

She propped herself up on one elbow. "My name is Jane Bentley, and I *am* from the East. But I don't work for the Baltimore *Sun*."

"Where in the East?"

She felt a sudden need for truth. "Chicago."

A long, tight silence stretched between them, and he was the one to break it at last. "Chicago. Are you from Pinkerton's?"

"Pinkerton's?"

"There's men in this territory he'd like to lay his hands on."

"Pinkerton's. You mean the detective agency?"

"I never heard of them sending out a woman, but they might."

She shook her head. "No. I'm not a Pinkerton agent. I'm not." She fell back on the pillow. "Are they after you?"

"No." He clasped his hands behind his back. "Look, ma'am, I know I'm badgering you, but believe me, this is important. You might say it's a matter of life and death." He stared at her. "If I don't know who you are, I can't protect you."

"I thought I was safe here."

He nodded. "Safe enough now. But you see, there's a stage coming by tomorrow, the regular stage to Tucson, and there's some question about whether we're going to put you on it or rob it."

"Or both," she said.

"Or both. There'd be danger then." He paced the length of the room once, twice. "You're taking the news real calmly, aren't you? You aren't surprised."

She chuckled softly. "I can't imagine what else you'd be doing out here in nowhere."

"And you say you're not a Pinkerton's."

"I'm not anybody's, Jack. I fell into this by accident, believe me." She smiled at her choice of words. "I'm just an innocent bystander."

He glanced toward the door once, and then he knelt by the side of the bed. "Listen to me, Miss Jane," he said very quietly. "I'm not an innocent bystander, and I'm not an outlaw. I am an Arizona Ranger, and I mean to get the goods on this gang. I'll protect you to the best of my ability. But that means you have to level with me and do exactly as I say."

She looked into his eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Completely."

She touched his shoulder tentatively, troubled by something she saw in his face, though she couldn't have said what. "Look, whoever or whatever

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you are, there are things I can't tell you about myself, and you'll just have to accept that. But I'm not from any law-enforcement agency. And I'm not any kind of criminal. I'm here by accident. Totally. And if you want me to cooperate with you, I will. I won't help you rob the stage, though."

"I don't expect it. How's your head?"

"All right now."

"Do you think you can ride?"

She sat up. "Now?"

He nodded.

"Sure."

"Then let's go."

"Where to?"

"I'll tell you on the way."

He knew a crevice that slanted up the canyon wall, bypassing the sentries. It was a rough trail for humans, impossible for horses. But at the top of the bluff, two horses were waiting. He boosted her into the saddle.

"Okay," she said, her hands light on the reins. "Where to now?"

"The stage stop north of here. We should catch the stage before it leaves at dawn. We'll telegraph Fort Huachuca from there and get a cavalry detachment to trail it."

"Pulling in your net, hmm?"

"It's time. Maybe past time. The ride's forty miles — think you can make it?"

"I can make it."

By moonlight, the desert was cool, the saguaro like ghost sentries casting faint shadows across their path. Their horses were fresh, eager, and the miles fled beneath their hooves. The sky was still dark when they reined into the stage stop and hailed the driver, who was just watering his team. The station master came out at their call, and the passengers. The latter were angry at first when Jack invoked his authority as a Ranger to force them to stay behind that day, but when they heard about the danger, they gave in. The station master telegraphed the fort and reported that the soldiers would be on their way immediately; the stage would not leave till their arrival, sometime after dawn.

"Won't your friends think there's something wrong if the stage isn't on time?" asked Jane.

Jack shook his head. "Stage isn't often on time. Anything can happen along the way, after all. Unexpected delays, breakdown, even Indians. Geronimo himself might come up from Mexico and decide he wants some Yankee gold."

They were sitting on a bench in front of the station, watching the sun come up, watching for the dust of the soldiers' horses on the horizon.

"You'll be all right here," he said to her. "Take the next stage to Tucson and forget all this. Go on to whatever it is you're really here for."

She had her feet propped up on the hitching rail, and she was mostly watching him while he looked eastward. "And what about you? Where do you go next?"

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"To meet my prisoners."

"You'll ride with the cavalry?"

"In a manner of speaking," he said. "I'll take a few of them in the coach with me, wrapped up in blankets so the uniforms don't show. The rest'll hang back, out of sight."

She frowned at him. "Isn't that a little dangerous? I mean, the outlaws'll be a bit startled when they see you inside. Don't you think they might shoot first and ask questions later?"

"The soldiers and me'll be armed."

"And outnumbered. Unless you can fit a lot more soldiers than I think into that stage."

"All we have to do is hold them till the others get there. We'll have enough guns for that."

She let her feet drop to the ground and sat up. "It sounds to me like you're trying to get yourself killed. I never heard of a man who didn't hate a double-crosser worse than a rattlesnake. And I have a feeling that Bob, at least, would be more than happy to blow your head off."

"And get the same himself?"

"People don't always think that far ahead." She laid her hand on his arm. "Pardon me for saying so, but I think this plan stinks. Why don't you just send the stage on through surrounded by cavalry?"

"They'll stay far away from that kind of stage."

"At least it'll get through."

"Fine. What about the next one? The cavalry can't escort every stagecoach in the territory."

"Listen," she said, leaning toward him. "Don't do this. I'd like to know you better, and I have a feeling I won't be able to if you get yourself killed."

He slapped her arm lightly. "Don't worry about me."

She stood up, facing away from him, and gripped the hitching rail with both hands. "You're too young to do something like this. Did anybody ever tell you that? You're too young to be an Arizona Ranger." She looked back at him over her shoulder. "You're throwing the future away, Jack. It's not worth all the money on that stage."

He shrugged. "When Billy the Kid was my age, he'd already killed twenty men."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty."

"Damn," she said.

"There are lawmen younger than me."

"They're crazy, too." Her grip on the rail tightened, and abruptly she heard the wood splintering. She stared down, saw her hands compressing the straight-grained rail as if it were taffy. She released it, leaving her handprints where no human should have been able to do so. She turned suddenly, her body hiding the marks of her strength. "Let me go with you," she said.

He laughed.

"I'm serious. I can shoot. I'm a damn good shot, with rifle or peacemaker. Probably better than most of the soldiers you'll have with you."

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"Don't be foolish," he said.

"You're the one who's being foolish."

"Let me, then, and don't get in on it." He stood up, gestured to the east, where dawn twilight was lighting the sky. "Almost time to start." He smiled down into her face. "Wish me luck."

"Luck? Yes, all the luck in the world. I want to see you again. Will you come back here afterward?"

He shook his head. "It's on to Tucson then, with my prisoners. There'll be a trial to see to."

"I'll be stopping in Tucson for a while."

"Then maybe I'll see you there." He looked past her, eastward again. "Here come the troops."

She caught him by the shoulders. "I want to see you again," she said. And then she locked her arms behind his neck and kissed him so hard their teeth grated. He pulled back a little and he held her a moment, held her close against him, and she could feel his heartbeat quicken till it was racing almost as fast as her own. When they parted at last, she whispered, "Don't forget me, Jack."

"No," he said. "I won't." He turned away to the stage then, and boarded as the soldiers arrived.

She watched the coach rumble away while the passengers chattered behind her and the station master stood with his hands on his hips, shaking his head. He didn't think much of the scheme, either. As the stage disappeared in a cloud of dust, Jane went around to the back of the station, where an arroyo hid her from other human eyes. From there, sure of herself for the first time since lightning had struck, she swooped up into the sky.

High above the desert, she knew she must look like a bird. The stagecoach, whose path she followed, resembled a mouse to her, a mouse crawling amid miniature sagebrush. The soldiers, following some distance behind, were like ants.

She sailed through the cloudless daylight, far slower than her ordinary speed, matching the progress of the coach; the desert was laid out beneath her like a map, the horizons infinitely farther away than seen from the ground. She spotted the approaching outlaws before anyone below could have. She heard them hail the coach, a faint shout borne upward on waves of heat. The driver pulled up.

She struck then, not diving to blast through the dusty group, but casting cactus spines down as if they were thunderbolts. She threw them with perfect accuracy, and the speed they acquired from the fall made them deadly. Like a rain of arrows, they splashed among the outlaws, and men tumbled from their horses, clutching their heads, their shoulders, their chests. Puffs of smoke showed that rifle fire had joined the fray, most of it from the coach. The sound of gunfire, when it reached her ears, was staccato,

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growing louder as she hovered, listening, watching. Growing louder and ringing through the clean desert air like the distant bell of an alarm clock.

She woke groggily to find herself covered with sweat. She threw the blankets back, thinking that she shouldn't pile so many on, not when she was dreaming about the desert. She washed the sweat away in the shower, but could not wash away the memory of the dream. She usually remembered her dreams, but this one was even sharper and more vivid than normal. Almost, she felt as if it had really happened, as if she had really known Jack, the young Arizona Ranger. She thought of him on the train all the way to work that morning and found herself looking for him again, though she knew she wouldn't find him. Perhaps he was someone from the past, someone she went to school with, someone she knew back when *she* was twenty, a lifetime ago. After work that night she dragged out her old high school and college yearbooks and searched for him, but though she found many familiar faces there, faces she hadn't seen or thought of in a dozen years and more, his was not among them.

Tucson, she thought while eating a leisurely dinner. She had never been to Tucson, only knew it through movies and books. It was part of the West, like Dodge and Amarillo and Carson City. She wasn't even sure of exactly where it was. The modern city was probably nothing like she imagined.

As she lay down for sleep, she thought of Tucson, of a town rising from the desert, all wooden storefronts and clapboard houses, and tumbleweed drifting through the streets. She thought of horses hitched in front of saloons and general stores and blacksmiths' shops; of unpaved, dusty streets and kerosene lamps; of men in Stetsons, with spurs on their boots, and women in poke bonnets and long gingham dresses.

She thought of Jack.

She stood at the window, watching the desert sun go down behind the general store. From the corner of her eye, she could see his parents' house, surrounded by its white picket fence. She had lived next-door to them for eight years now.

Sixteen years ago, her mind had heard his silent birth-cry and understood instantly that another like her had come into the world, the only other. But she was a child then, and had to grow up before she could begin the long search for him. She had come to Tucson at last when she was twenty and he was eight; she had known him on the street, a dusty little boy playing with other dusty children. She had known, and she had bought the house next door to his. The townspeople had marveled that so young a woman could afford a house of her own, but money was never a problem for her, not when she could drive into the sea and bring back the sunken treasures of all the past to sell. Money was the

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least of her problems.

She had watched him grow, watched him play and learn and discover himself. She had seen him fall out of the oak tree, a fall that would have broken bones in a normal child; she had seen him walk away without a limp. As nearest neighbor, she had often looked after him while his parents were busy, and she had used those times to introduce him to the world beyond the horizon, through books. She had watched over him, and she had waited for the right moment to tell him that she *knew*. She had waited as he grew tall and straight. She had waited, and now he was sixteen, old enough, and she was beginning to feel that time was passing too swiftly. Too old, she thought, standing at the window in the red light of sunset. Soon I'll be too old.

They had been playing chess, seated at right angles to each other in easy chairs, and while he had been considering a particularly tricky move, she had risen and walked across the room. Now he called to her.

"Your move."

She turned toward him. He was lighting the lamp beside the chessboard, and the wavering flame threw his clean, crisp profile into sharp relief. His face was beautiful, she thought, still soft with youth but promising the manhood to come. Beautiful; the word handsome wasn't appropriate at all. She sat down, examined the board, and pushed a bishop over three spaces.

He shook his head. "You just messed up my whole strategy."

"Sorry."

"But it really was the best move." He looked up at her and smiled, and she felt a pang in her chest. How does he see me, she wondered. He's growing up so fast.

They traded a few more moves. "You're trapped now," he said at last. "No way out."

Are there girls his own age, she wondered, in the time I don't see him? Are there relationships I don't know anything about? Or has he realized that no ordinary woman will ever be enough?

"Yes," she said. "I think we're on our way to a checkmate." She moved her king and then sat back in her chair to watch him study the board. Am I fooling myself? Would he rather have one of them — young, fresh. Innocent. She looked down at her hands, at the finely manicured nails. He's only sixteen, she thought, and her hands closed into fists as the knot in her chest ached.

"That's it," he said, making the final move. "Care for a rematch?"

She shook her head. "No, I've had enough chess for one night. You can put them away." She stood up and stretched. Then she moved behind his chair and sat on the back while he slipped the ivory chesspieces into their felt-lined box. "You're beating me too consistently these days," she said. "We're going to have to find some other game." She let her hand slide

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across the upholstery and come to rest on his shoulder. After a moment she began to knead the muscles at the base of his neck.

"That feels good," he said.

"It's supposed to."

He closed the box on the chess-pieces and twisted in his chair to look up at her. "Jane, you know my mother pretty well."

"I ought to, after all these years."

"Well ... I think I have a problem with her."

"Oh?" Her other hand joined the first, and with one working on each side of his neck, he leaned back and let his head tilt so that he was looking at her upside down.

"She says ... I should stop coming over here. Especially at night. She says it doesn't look right."

Jane looked down into his bright eyes. "To whom?"

"To everyone."

"To her, you mean."

He pursed his lips a moment. "Yeah. To her."

"What does your father say?"

"I haven't discussed it with him."

"And you?" she asked, her hands moving to his cheeks, to his temples, stroking softly. "What do you think?"

"I think ... that I'm old enough to make my own decisions. That's what I told her."

"She didn't take that too well, I suppose?"

"She said ... it was your reputation she was worried about."

"Oh — my reputation." She smiled down at him. "Well — evil to him who evil thinks. Motto of the Order of the Garter."

"Jane?" He lifted a hand and touched hers.

"Yes, Jack?"

"Is it really all right, my coming here?"

"Of course it is. I like being with you. I like it very much." She moved from the back of the chair to its upholstered arm, never taking her hands away from him. Her palms slid to his collarbones, massaging gently, to his shirtfront. She could feel the firm young pectoral muscles beneath the fabric.

Lightly, his hand skipped up her arm to stroke her shoulder. "You know, Jane, I don't have any other friends like you. You're ... special."

"I'm glad to hear it. You're special to me, too."

"I remember ... you used to kiss me good-night a long time ago."

"Yes."

"Why did we ever stop that?"

"You grew up," she said. "You decided a handshake was a more adult way of saying good-night."

"My mother still kisses me."

"I'd kiss you, too, if you'd let me."

"I'll let you."

She bent over him and kissed his forehead, nose, and cheek. "But not good-night," she whispered. "Not yet. It's still early." Then softly, very softly, she kissed his mouth.

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He sighed. "Don't ever leave me, Jane."

"Never," she said.

His hand reached up and cupped her breast, and she gasped at the contact. He would have drawn back then, but she pressed both her hands against his, hard. With his free arm, he pulled her into his lap. He kissed her throat, her cheeks, her lips, and the warm, moist meeting of their tongues was like an electric shock reverberating between them. They slid out of the chair to the deep rug that waited, like a bed, to receive them. He peeled her shirt away, and his, and then they were flesh to flesh, clinging, twining together. And somehow the rug evaporated, the floor, the house, the town, the desert, until they floated in a warm sea of darkness, just the two of them alone in the universe, with nothing to keep them apart. There was no awkwardness between them, only rising hunger and the merging and melting of orgasm.

Afterward, the room came back into sharp focus, and this time there was a crackling fire in the hearth. In her arms, Jack was weeping quietly.

"Don't leave me, Jane," he whispered.

"My darling," she crooned, rocking him gently, as if he were her child. "I'll never leave you."

His eyes were brighter than ever in the firelight. "I love you, Jane," he said. "I'll always love you, no matter what happens."

"And I'll always love you. I *have* always loved you, you know — since you were eight years old."

He looked into her face, his gaze penetrating — it seemed to Jane — all the way to her marrow. "No," he said. "You haven't loved me that long. But you do now, don't you?"

She raised a hand to his cheek, troubled by his words and his eyes. She felt a tightening in her chest, and her own tears were suddenly very near the surface. Her voice was unsteady as she murmured, "Yes. I do now."

She felt him shiver, and he buried his face in her neck. "I'm so afraid that I'll lose you," he whispered. "I waited so long for you, Jane. So long."

She stroked his fine, pale hair. "And I've waited for you. But we're together now. There's nothing to be sad about."

The telephone began to ring. Jane sighed. "Probably your mother, wanting you to come home."

Jack's arms tightened around her. "Don't answer it."

"I have to."

"No, please."

"If it is your mother, she can see the lights. She knows we're here. Do you want her to think we're up to something?" She smiled. "Even if we *are*."

"Please, Jane, don't answer it."

"I have to." She freed an arm from his embrace and reached out for the phone. It was close by. On the table beside her bed.

Jack dissolved from her arms; the

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fire, the rug, everything dissolved, and the persistent ringing was the alarm clock, announcing morning.

For a moment, she felt disoriented. Her fingers clutched at the sheets, too tightly. She swung an arm out at the clock, swept it to the floor; the impact silenced it. She closed her eyes. Almost, she could feel his arms around her, smell his skin, taste his lips. Almost. When she sat up at last, she was crying, because it was only a dream after all, and she was ashamed of those tears. She tore the covers back and rolled out of bed. Work, she thought. Work will take my mind off the dream. How stupid, how absolutely stupid to feel this way about a dream. The shower spray washed her tears away and left her feeling cool and empty. He was no one. He didn't exist.

She was unusually quiet that day, and her secretary asked if she was sick. She shook her head sharply. Later, the district manager noticed and suggested she go home early and get some rest, but she refused. It was Friday, and there was too much work to clear away before the weekend. She was late getting home that night. And she dawdled over dinner.

It's not that I'm afraid to go to sleep, she told herself.

Could she bring him back to her tonight? Or would he have vanished into the nothingness that claimed used dreams? She was afraid to find out. She was afraid not to find out. She ached for him, ached for the feel of his hands on her flesh, of his lips. He didn't even exist, and she ached for him so much that she felt weak just thinking about it.

At nine o'clock she threw herself into bed. She didn't set the alarm.

With sleep, came the desert. The desert on a winter's night, cold with moonlight and a million icy stars. "Jack!" she shouted, and her voice was lost in the immense flatness, absorbed by air and sand. "Jack?" She floated upward slowly, into the clear darkness, till the land was spread out beneath her like a velvet cape. "Jack!" she shouted. "Jack, where are you?" She looked up at the moon, looming above her. "Don't take him away," she begged. "Oh, please don't take him away." She shivered in that black infinity of sky and earth. "Oh, please," she whispered. "Please." She felt the tears starting from her eyes, and freezing as they left her face, saltwater diamonds falling through the night.

And then, from far off, like a breath of wind, she heard him calling her name. She flew toward the sound, and the desert swept below her till it reared into mountains. On the highest peak he waited, calling to her, holding out his arms for her. She clasped him, and they spun slowly, weightless, kissing, weeping.

"I was afraid we'd never find each other again," he whispered.

"Never say that, darling," she cried. "I love you. I'll always love you."

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"I thought you'd forget. I thought you'd go away."

"How could I forget you, darling?"

"You *could*," he said, holding her tighter than ever. "Oh, I've been waiting so long for someone who wouldn't forget." He kissed her neck, her face, her hands. "I've been so lonely, Jane. The others were all just dream people, coming and going and never caring, never really caring." He searched her face. "But you care. I know you do. Swear it, Jane. Swear you'll never forget me."

She held his face in her hands. "Oh, my dear, I could never forget you. I've been waiting, too."

A fur-lined cradle formed about them, cupping them together and rocking slowly in the great darkness of the sky. They clung to each other, their hands moving softly, without haste.

"Oh, Jane," he said, his fingers tracing the planes of her cheek, "we have everything. We have the universe."

"Yes."

He kissed her throat. "But it felt like nothing before I found you. I lived a thousand lives before I found you, and they were all nothing." He looked into her eyes, and the moonlight struck highlights in his own. "You do know," he said, "that this is all a dream?"

Her hands tightened on him. "Oh, Jack, don't let it be a dream. Please."

"Jane...."

"I don't want to wake up and lose you again."

"Jane, darling, it's a dream, but it's real, too. Because you and I are real."

"I'm real," she murmured against his neck.

"And so am I," he said. "Can't you tell? Can't you feel it?"

She held him hard, trying to match every inch of his body with her own. "I only know that when I wake up, I still want you."

"Because I'm real. Don't you see? I'm not a dream person. I'm flesh and blood, like you. So many times I've met people in my dreams and thought they were real, and then they disappeared. Just like you disappeared from the cabin. The window was too small to climb out of, and I'd been watching the door, but you were gone."

"The alarm clock rang. I woke up."

"Your story was so bizarre, so unexpected. Writing articles for the Baltimore *Sun*. I would never have thought of that. I didn't manufacture that part of the dream; *you* did. I couldn't predict anything you'd say. The dream was going in directions I couldn't control. I thought ... it had to mean that you had *volition*. That you were *real*. And then you disappared."

"I didn't want to. I wanted to see you again."

"And when I walked in later, you were there again. For a minute I was startled, and then I realized that a day had passed for you, and you were sleeping again. Dreaming again. And you had to be real. You *had* to be. And I was frightened, not knowing what it

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meant. Not knowing whether to keep up the charade or blot it out and confront you. I tried some, within the context of the dream, to find out ... who you were, what you were. But when you wouldn't go along with me, I didn't have the nerve to push it. So I stayed with the Ranger and the outlaws, hoping we'd meet in Tucson. And we did, in *your* dream. I was so glad to find myself there. I would have played any role to be with you again."

She stroked his back, his hair, his arms. "Oh, Jack, I want to believe you; I do. But if I believe you and then wake up to find it's a lie, it'll hurt so much."

"It's true. It is!"

"But I've dreamed of people night after night, the same people, and it never made them any more real. I've even had the exact same dream more than once."

"Darling, this is different. Can't you feel it?"

"I don't know. It feels so real now, you feel so real, but when I wake up, you're gone." She pressed her face against his neck. "When I'm awake, I'm so ashamed of being in love with a dream."

"But how do you feel now?"

"Now, I love you. Now, I know I'll always love you. Dreams don't have to be rational."

He gripped her as tightly as she gripped him. "You love me because you know I'm real. Inside, you know. You couldn't love a figment of your imagination."

She shook her head against his shoulder. "I don't know. I've never been happy with reality. I've always liked dreams better. But this.... Oh, my God, Jack, Jack, I don't know what this is. Am I going crazy?"

"No," he whispered fiercely.

"How can we both be real? How can two people share a dream?"

"Two people who were searching for each other. Who needed each other. How many years did you wait for me, Jane? How many did you *really* wait?"

She sighed. "All my life." She lifted her head. "Jack ... if you're real ... let's meet while we're awake."

He stared into her face. He seemed pale, paler even than the moonlight. "No."

"Why not?"

"We can't."

"Are you ... so far away? I can come to you. Halfway around the world if I have to. Where are you?"

"No."

"Jack."

"We can't meet, Jane. Believe me."

"Because ... you're only a dream? Because the part of me that is pretending to be you knows that ... that you're not out there in the real world?"

He closed his eyes and pressed his cheek against hers. "You have to trust me, darling."

"How can I? How can I know you're real if I can't touch you?"

"You're touching me now."

"That doesn't prove anything."

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"Does there have to be proof between us? Can't we just leave well enough alone?"

She moved her hands across his back and down the firm muscles that flanked his spine. They were tense, as if he were holding in some terrible secret. "Jack ... what's the matter?"

He shook his head.

"Is it ... that you're married?"

He tilted his head back to look at her. "You mean, in reality?"

She hesitated, feeling herself caught between belief and disbelief. "Yes. I guess I mean that."

"No, I'm not married."

"Are you ... older than you seem?"

Lightly, he kissed her lips. "How old do I seem to you?"

"Very young."

"I am very young. Not quite twenty-one."

"And I'm ... too old for you. Is that it?"

"No."

"I'm thirty-two."

"I know."

"I am too old for you."

"No, Jane."

"But I'd seem old ... to your parents."

"I don't care what they think."

"Then why can't we meet?"

"Oh, Jane." There was pain in his voice, pain in his hands that clutched her shoulders. "Don't ask any more. Please. If we meet like this, we'll have the universe. We'll build whatever world we like, and when we stop liking it we'll build another. Don't spoil it with reality. We have something so wonderful. We can *do* whatever we want, *be* whatever we want. When you know you're dreaming, you're in control. Do you want a South Sea island paradise? Here —" He waved a hand, and the fur-lined cradle evaporated, leaving them lying on a beach of pure white sand. Palm trees coalesced around them, and she could hear the gentle lapping of surf somewhere in the distance. "Do you want adventure?" he asked. He sat up. "Look!" She sat up, too, and she saw the ocean almost at her feet, and silhouetted against the horizon, a three-masted ship. "They'll send a longboat to shore at dawn, and we'll meet them there. Or we'll dive to the bottom of the sea, walk in space, explore Mars. We can go to any place, any time. Together."

She looked into his eager face. "It sounds beautiful," she said.

"And if we get tired of all that excitement, we can always go back to the house in old Tucson where you watched me grow up. That other me." The sand became a thick, soft rug, the lowering moon a mellow fire, and walls sprang up where palm trees had been. "This is your place," he said. "Your imagination built it."

"Yes," she said. "This was the place where you and I were special, the only two special people in the world."

"It's still true," he told her, and he reached out to the fireplace poker. He held it in both hands and slowly bent

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it into a horseshoe. Solemnly, he gave it to her, and she straightened it. "Just the two of us," he said. "We can fly."

She tossed the poker aside and wrapped her arms about him. "Be real, Jack. Oh, be real for me."

He picked her up then, as if she were a feather, and he carried her into the bedroom. A familiar bed was waiting for them, not the one from her waking home, but the steel-framed bed from the desert cabin.

"You'll have to leave me sometime soon," he said as he set her down. "Promise you'll come back. Promise."

"I love you," she said. "Real or not."

"And you'll come back."

"Yes. Always."

They had time to make love, long, leisurely love, and then she fell asleep in his arms.

And woke in her own bed. The clock said twelve, and the daylight streaming through the curtained windows made that noon. But the television, when she turned it on to catch some news, told her it was Sunday. She had slept thirty-nine hours. She was ravenous. Over a thick ham sandwich, she pondered her situation.

Consideration of the question was absurd, she knew, but she decided to ignore the absurdity. For the moment, she set rationality aside. Assuming she had no doubts, assuming Jack was real, where was he? Why did he refuse to meet her?

A corner of her brain protested that this was madness, but she would not listen.

There was a good reason, a painful reason why he would not meet her. A reason too shameful, perhaps, to talk about. What terrible secret could she imagine? That he was a criminal in some maximum-security prison? A three-time loser, a rapist? A murderer? Was he on death row somewhere? The thought chilled her, and she pushed it away. It was only the worst thing she could think, not the most likely. What *was* likely? She thought back to the dreams they had shared, searching for a clue. There had to be a clue hidden there — in the desert, in the canyon, in the tiny cabin where she had recuperated.

The bed?

In three dreams she had encountered that bed, the third time out of its ordinary place, if the cabin was its ordinary place. It was an old-fashioned-looking thing. Where had she seen one like it before? A prison movie, something with James Cagney maybe? No, those were bunk beds, with narrow, thin mattresses. This was something else. But hauntingly familiar. She ransacked her memory. The bed was the key, she was sure of it. Sturdy steel frame, thick, firm mattress. Where had she seen one like it before?

Hospital?

Hospital.

She finished the sandwich quickly, washed it down with a glass of milk, and went back to bed. As always, sleep

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came quickly. Ever since she was a child, sleep had come quickly, even when her body wasn't tired. Sleep and dreams.

She was in control now. Though she seemed to float in darkness, there was a solid surface beneath her. She conjured up a light — a fluorescent fixture — and a pastel wall to hang it on. She summoned the bed and set it beneath the light. Yes, hospital bed. She had never noticed the bars before, the bars that could be moved up like the sides of a crib, to keep the patient from falling out.

"Jack!" she called. "Jack, where are you?"

Only silence answered her.

"Jack, don't be afraid. I love you, no matter what. Come to me. Please. Don't let me be here alone."

The sound of sobbing made her turn around. Beside the bed a chair had materialized, but translucent, like mist. On the chair sat the shape of a woman, translucent, too, her hands clutching the upraised bar on the bed. She was weeping softly.

"Who are you?" said Jane.

The woman seemed not to hear, did not raise her head. Jane willed her to become solid, but she did not.

"That's my mother," said Jack's voice.

Jane turned again, and Jack stood to her left, his hands clasped behind his back. He wore a white coat over his familiar shirt and jeans, as if he were a doctor.

"That's all she ever does," he said. "Unless she just sits and stares. Come away, Jane. You don't want to watch her."

She pointed to the empty bed. "And where are you?"

"Not here," he said. "Not ever here."

"What hospital, Jack? Tell me."

"You don't want to know. I'm sorry I gave you a chance to guess this. But some things ... some things impress themselves on the memory, whether we want them or not."

"I have to know, Jack. You must understand that. I have to know ... or I'll always doubt."

He turned away from her, held his head in his hands. "I don't want to think about it. I don't want to remember. It's better that way, Jane, believe me. You just don't understand."

She put her arms around him from behind and leaned her head on his shoulder. "Maybe I don't," she said. "But I have to know."

He clasped her wrists. He was breathing hard, as if he'd run a thousand miles. "You won't leave me?"

"Never."

His voice was hoarse. "All right. If that's what you really want. I'll show you. But it's rocky trip."

"I'm with you."

He nodded. "Yes."

Her universe turned upside down, and her whole body jerked, as if she were a thermometer being shaken. The sun was overhead one instant and be-

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neath her feet the next, spinning, tumbling as she tumbled, as she slammed some unyielding surface again and again. There was no pain. She felt nothing at all, only *saw* sun, pavement, white line down the center, cars swerving with screaming brakes. Then she was still, and the sun poured down on her, glinting off her helmet, her wristwatch, and the dented chrome of the motorcycle that was twisted around her body. She was still, and time slowed while faces bent over her, speaking words she couldn't understand. Eons passed there in the sunlight, and finally the ambulance arrived, and she was shunted inside, and more eons oozed by before the doors opened again and she was removed. EMERGENCY ENTRANCE. PIMA COUNTY HOSPITAL. The double glass doors opened like a giant mouth, and then she was sliding, sliding down the creature's gullet.

"No more," Jack whispered. "No more." And the scene faded as if a projector lamp had burned out. Darkness was everywhere, dark nothingness without even a star to draw the eyes, but Jack was there, with his arms around her, and she could feel the wetness of his tears on her cheek. He was shaking as with fever.

"Where's Pima County?" she whispered.

"Arizona."

"The desert."

She felt him nod. "I grew up there."

"I'll go tomorrow."

"No. Please. It won't do any good."

"I have to, Jack."

"I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"Don't go."

"What's your last name, Jack?"

He shook his head.

"Do I have to search the hospital for you? Do I have to go through every room? Don't be stubborn, darling."

He sighed, a deep, wrenching sigh. "Elliot. John Elliot. I never ... liked that name."

She made the fur-lined cradle envelope them, and the moon and stars brighter and warmer than they could ever be from Earth. "My darling," she said, rocking him in her arms. "You worry too much."

"I'm afraid, Jane. I wish you wouldn't go."

"Will I find you there, Jack? Are you real?"

"I'm real!"

"Then there's nothing to fear."

He was quiet then, and they stayed like that, holding onto each other under the preternatural sky until the alarm rang on Monday morning.

The first thing she did after rolling out of bed was dig an old road atlas out of the bottom drawer of her bureau. On the map of Arizona she searched for Pima County and its largest city.

Tucson.

She called a couple of airlines before finding one that flew there. By the

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time she had packed and phoned for a cab, it was late enough to call in sick at the office. Her first sick day in three years.

Tucson was not as she had dreamed it, of course. It was a Twentieth Century city, full of paved streets and automobiles and supermarkets, and a Wells Fargo stage would have looked as incongruous there as a cactus in the Arctic. She checked into the downtown Holiday Inn, dropped her bags, and took a cab to the hospital. The driver let her off behind the building.

EMERGENCY ENTRANCE. PIMA COUNTY HOSPITAL.

She stared at the sign, at those words burned into her memory by the desert sun. She stared long and hard. She could go home now. She had her proof. She could remember the stretcher being lifted from the ambulance and rolled through those double glass doors. She could go home now, and be sure.

She walked all the way around the building and went in by the front entrance. The receptionist looked up expectantly as she aproached the desk.

"I'm here to see John Elliot," she said.

The woman gazed at her with a peculiar, unreadable expression. "Are you ... family?" she said.

"Yes."

She looked through a card file. "Someone's with him now."

"His mother," said Jane. "She's expecting me."

The woman's pen poised over a card. "And your relationship...?"

"I'm her niece. His first cousin."

She hesitated, then scribbled on the card. She handed it to Jane, who couldn't make out the writing — initials, she guessed. A formal okay. "Room 382. Show this to the nurse at the station, and bring it back here when you leave. The elevator's over there." She pointed with the pen.

The third floor nurse passed her with another peculiar look. Room 382 was at the end of the hall.

His mother was there, the wraith-woman Jane had seen, full flesh now, and looking very old. She sat by the bed, but she was staring out the window and did not see Jane enter. Or perhaps she thought it was a nurse, no one to pay attention to.

Jack lay on the bed. The sidebars were up, and Jane understood now why they had been excised from his dream-bed. They were a symbol of his prison. Within it, he lay very still, the white sheet tucked close about him, his arms resting limp on top of it. Behind the bed stood a phalanx of machinery, and Jack was attached to it all by tubes in his arms, tubes in his nose, tubes snaking under the sheet.

Jack. His closed eyes were ringed with darkness, his cheeks sunken, his lips pale. He was thin, wasted, frail, hardly a muscle left in his arms, his collarbones standing out stark above the neck of his hospital gown. Jack, sleeping, with the remnant of his young

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beauty wan against the white pillow.

"How is he?" Jane said.

"The same," muttered his mother. "Always the same." She turned from the window, and when her eyes lit on the visitor, she frowned. "Who are you?"

"A friend," Jane said. "I ... heard about it. I thought as long as I was going to be in Tucson I'd stop in. I told them downstairs that I was your niece. I apologize for that. But I had to come."

His mother shrugged. "There's nothing to see." Her voice was tired, with more than body weariness. "I come every day, and there's never anything to see."

Jane gripped the top rail on the side opposite his mother. "How long has it been now?"

"Three years, nine months, and twelve days."

Her fingers tightened on the bar. "So long?" she murmured. "And what do the doctors say?"

"The same as always. He might wake up tomorrow. He might never wake up." She passed a hand across her forehead. "I don't understand it. I never will. I still pray. I don't know why."

Jane laid a hand on his cheek, his cool, pale cheek. "Oh, Jack," she whispered.

"Jack?" said his mother. "You must be a friend from school. They all called him Jack."

"He asked me to call him that." He didn't move at her touch. He didn't flick an eyebrow. Just above her hand, the tube entered his nostrils. Was it forcing him to breathe? "Have they looked at his brainwaves?"

"Oh, yes, that's something they do pretty often. He has some. And his eyes move sometimes. I've seen them. The doctor says it's like he's dreaming."

Jane moved her hand to his arm, his wasted arm whose corded muscles she had touched — was it only last night?

His mother played with a handkerchief in her lap. "I suppose it's a shock to you, to see him like this."

"Yes."

"Every time I see him...." She shook her head. "I don't know why I keep coming here. It seems so hopeless." She twisted the handkerchief. "My husband won't. He's given up. He thinks ... he thinks John will never wake up. He ... he's talking about asking the doctors to ... to turn off all these things. To let John die."

Jane looked up sharply. "He mustn't do that!" She caught herself then and said in a softer, more controlled voice, "Have the doctors given you any reason to stop hoping?"

"No. But none to keep hoping, either. They just don't know. Are you a doctor?"

"No. No." She looked down once more to his sunken eyes and hollow cheeks. "Please," she said, "may I stay here a little while? I just want to sit

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quietly with him. I won't bother you. Do you mind?"

His mother shrugged. "Sit if you like. There's another chair in the corner." She looked out the window again. "I sit here a lot myself. Quietly."

Jane pulled the chair up close to the bed, leaned her head against the bars and closed her eyes. But she could not sleep upright, not with the woman sitting so close, glancing in her direction every few moments, and at last visiting hours ended. She walked Jack's mother to her bus and then caught a cab for the Holiday Inn. She had dinner in the motel's restaurant and immediately afterward went to bed.

She dreamed herself back in the hospital room, standing by the bed, but this time she and the comatose John Elliot were alone. He was precisely as she had seen him, plastic tubing pouring life into his wasted body. She touched his cheek again, just as she had before. "Wake up, Jack," she said. "You must wake up."

The Jack she knew materialized out of darkness on the other side of the bed. He was healthy, strong, but his eyes were full of pain. "Now you know."

She nodded. "It's not so awful. Nothing a few calories and some exercise couldn't mend." She came around the bed and embraced him. "It's eerie, though, seeing you like that."

"I didn't want you to."

"It doesn't make me love you any less." She laughed softly. "In fact, I love you more now, because I know you're real. You're flesh and blood. And when you wake up, we can be together all the time, not just in our dreams. I'll move to Tucson if I have to. Or I'll bring you to Chicago. Or we'll go someplace else entirely — whatever seems best."

"I can't wake up," he said.

"But you have to. You can't stay like this."

"I can't. I don't know how."

She looked into his face. "Have you tried?"

"Tried?" He bent his head into the hollow of her neck and held her with his hands curled into claws. "Oh, I tried so hard. They put me under for surgery, and I never came out of it. I knew I was dreaming. I knew it was all ghosts and make believe, and I tried so hard to climb out of it! And then after a while, I knew it was no use, and I had to ... adjust. Jane, Jane, it was so lonely with all those dream people coming and going and being puppets. They did what I wanted them to do, and behind their eyes was nothing. Nothing. I could pretend to love one of them, pretend she loved me, but I always knew there was nothing there. It was so terribly lonely till I found you."

She stroked his hair. "Won't you try to wake up ... for me, Jack?"

"I've tried," he whispered. "Oh, Jane, I've tried. But ... I'm afraid."

"Of what?"

"After the accident. Don't you remember? I didn't feel anything after

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the first bounce. I didn't feel anything. I was conscious, but ... I think my body must be paralyzed from the neck down. My body. But not *me.*" His hands slid up to her shoulders, moved stiffly there, up and down. "I can feel you, Jane. I can feel you touch me. But what if I wake up and I *can't?*" He raised his shaking hands to her cheeks. "And what's to guarantee that we'll still have our dreams if I wake up? What if we lose contact? Never to feel your skin against mine. Never to make love to you again. How could I bear that? It would be ... like dying. Oh, Jane, we have so much now. I can't throw it away for a bunch of maybes."

She held him tight. "But it's such a precarious existence, Jack. What if you get pneumonia? What if...?" She left the question hanging in midair.

"They take good care of me," he said. "Better than if I were awake. I have a whole troop of doctors and nurses watching over me."

"It must be expensive for your parents."

"They won't let me die just because it's expensive." He kissed her cheek, her ear. "Oh, Jane, everything's all right as it is. Leave it be."

"Jack...."

"Dream with me forever, Jane. Just dream with me."

She pressed her cheek against his. "All right, my love. All right." She let the bed go, the tubing, the machinery, and brought back the clean desert night for both of them.

When she woke, she called the hospital to locate the doctor in charge of John Elliot's case. After a great deal of insistent conversation with nurses, secretaries, answering services and his wife, she tracked him down. *Imperative,* she said in her crispest, most professional tone, and he finally agreed to see her for a few minutes after his morning rounds.

They met in the chapel, which was empty at that early hour. He wore a white coat with the hospital's name stitched over the pocket. He looked at his watch frequently. "Now, what was so imperative, Miss Bentley?"

"I'm deeply concerned about John Elliot," she said.

"Are you a relative?"

"No, an extremely close friend."

"You've spoken to his parents?"

"His mother."

He nodded. "She can certainly tell you anything you need to know."

"Doctor, I need to know his chances of ever waking up."

"As I said, his mother can fill you in on his case. I really can't discuss the details with an outsider." He made a move to stand up, but she cut it short with her hand on his arm.

"Doctor," she said, "what if his father decides to pull the plug on his life-support equipment?"

He looked at her narrowly. "He'd have to go to court to do anything like that."

"And if he did?"

"I'd recommend against it. There

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are still brainwaves. The boy's alive by medical standards."

"Even with all that machinery attached to him?"

"Yes."

"It's expensive stuff, isn't it?"

"If you want to put a price on life, yes, it is."

"Do you know what kind of insurance coverage the Elliots have?"

He frowned. "Don't you think you should ask them about that, Miss Bentley?"

"I think you must know."

The frown deepened. "What are you getting at?"

"What if John Elliot never wakes up?"

"We can't know that. People have been in comas longer than he has and come out of them."

"His father seems to have given up hope. What happens when his mother does, too?"

He shook his head. "I can't answer that. I don't know that their hope matters one way or the other."

She leaned toward him. "I want to make sure John will be cared for permanently, Doctor. No matter what happens. Even if I have to take over total financial responsibility for him myself. Even if I have to go to court and get myself named his legal guardian. It would help a lot if you were on my side."

He looked into her face for a long moment. "What's your interest in this case?"

"I told you, I'm an extremely close friend."

"You know, I can't promise you that he'll ever wake up. No one can promise that."

"I understand, Doctor. I'm not fooling myself on that score. Will you help me?"

"All right," he said. "They can use some help. This has been rough on them, financially as well as emotionally. They'll appreciate ... a philanthropist." He stood up. "I think we should talk to them, the two of us. Sometime this week? Just to straighten

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things out. You don't mind that, do you? I've always been honest with them, never hidden anything." He hesitated. "Unless of course you'd prefer to be anonymous."

"Anytime this week is fine," said Jane.

He shook her hand. "Leave me your number and I'll call you."

"I'm staying at the downtown Holiday Inn."

"You're not from Tucson?"

"No. Chicago."

"Where did you know John from?"

She smiled at him. "Does it matter, Doctor?"

He had not expected that answer, and his confusion showed on his face. "No, I suppose not. *I* knew him for quite a while. Since before he started fooling with motorcycles. He was a good boy."

"Yes," said Jane. "I know."

That night, as they drifted in the starlit desert air, she told Jack her plans. She would go back home and carry on with her job by day, supporting the two of them. By night, they would be together — every night, for always. And after she said that and kissed him to seal the promise, he conjured up Mardi Gras for her, complete with costumed throngs and lavish floats and wild music, with bright lights and dancing and laughter. It was all so crisp, so thoroughly realized, that she knew he had been there once, and loved it. And in the midst of the color and sound, towering over the carnival, was a wedding cake three stories high.

Jack scooped a blob of white frosting from the lowest tier and licked it off his fingers. "I'm sentimental," he said. "Always have been."

They linked left hands, and on the third finger of each a gold band coalesced.

"So am I," said Jane.

All around them, dream people began to throw rice.

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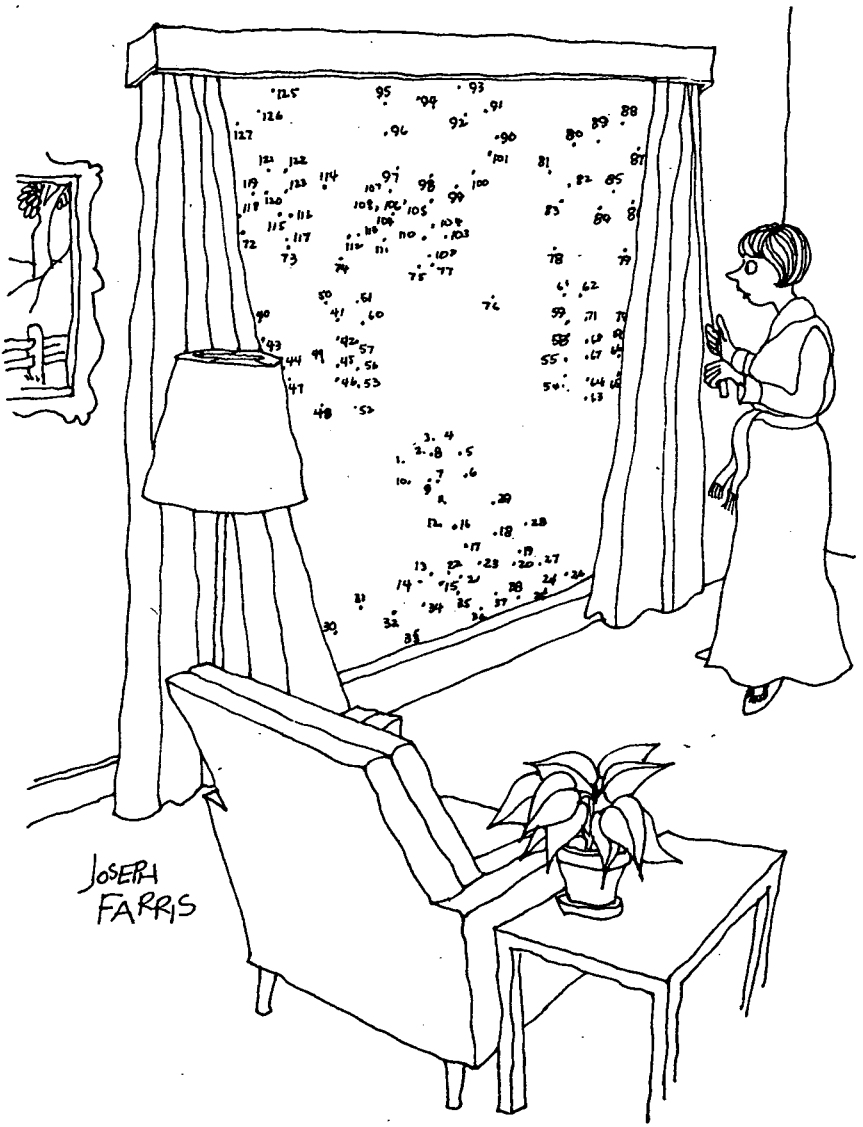

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Garry Kilworth's new story concerns the human settlement of an alien ghost town that turns out to be an almost perfect environment, except for one deadly catch....

Almost Heaven

BY
GARRY KILWORTH

...and we came to a low, wide valley with cool terraces covered in fists of fruit trees. Through the middle of the valley ran a green, clear river into which we fell in dusty hundreds, bathing and drinking, and for the first time in many months, laughing. The pack animals, too, clustered at the water's edge taking in long draughts of liquid and bellowing their delight. The great march over the Eastern Deserts was over, and we had found the interior.

As one of the forward scouts I was first upon the town. On glimpsing the white walls of the houses through the evergreen, I felt a certain disappointment, which was foolish really, since the slopes had obviously been cultivated: we were not the first. There was a strange feeling of trespassing as we walked cautiously through the weed-covered empty streets. Silence is not a comfortable companion in alien surroundings. We called out, once or twice, thinking they might be hiding from us — half-expecting that they would fall upon us with primitive weapons, since we were surely the first humans to reach the valley. By the time we found the central building, with its huge pear-shaped bell, we were reasonably sure they had gone — either temporarily, or perhaps permanently.

"Ghost town," said Baker, but his blue eyes kept flicking along the rooftops. Finally, after inspecting most of the dwellings, we allowed the others to enter. Night fell and we posted sentries. Some camped in the streets rather than violate the dwellings. I watched the domestic stock incessantly. If there were any hostile aliens, the first signs of nervousness would come from the animals. Our watch fires picked out only shadows, and by dawn con-

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fidence had grown. Though wary, we were still hard from the privations of the journey, and our weapons, we knew, would be superior to any *they* would use. We had not at that time shed our colonial arrogance and still carried, banner-like, the bigot's belief in a unique righteousness. We saw it our duty to impose our culture, not to blend it with another.

I had a friend, ugly as the trunk of an olive tree. Her name was Theloniki. Baker, Thel and I were the best scouts: we were most suited to the work, having those qualities necessary to ensure the smoothest passage for the caravan. We were natural navigators; were not oblivious to caution yet had an underlying professional sense of adventure. Since Atkins went missing, Baker had preferred to work alone. Thel and I never let each other get beyond communicating distance — whether it was sight or sound. I was the youngest, at twenty-seven years. Thel was nearly twice my age. Baker fell somewhere between us. That any of us should be less important than we had been, or would ever be regarded as interesting but obsolete characters of best-forgotten times had crossed our minds fleetingly, if at all. We had been too busy reaching for the next horizon. Our fall was sudden. We might as well have joined Atkins in his ravine, or wherever it was that his body lay. Within a week the people had moved into the empty houses and had begun to regulate their domesticity. They no longer needed scouts. The requirement was for tradesmen, farmers and herdsmen — yes, and artists too, for there was time for appreciation once more. It was a time for leisure and crafts. But not for wandering. People had had enough of new hills, fresh plains, wide deserts. They wanted to rest their legs and exercise their arms.

I have seen holograms in the old First City which my parents colonized: three-dimensional pictures of towns pocketed by hillsides on faraway Earth. Hills around a sea called the Mediterranean. This alien-built town was similarly fashioned, with low houses fitting into the natural hollows of the rock and interconnected by a maze of winding alleys, steps and narrow streets. From a long way off it appeared as a single amorphous, nebulous construction. I loved it at first sight. It was white, cool and purpose-built.

We were sitting outside the place we shared, Thel, Baker and I, watching the sun pulling in its evening nets. I think all three of us wished we were caught in those shining meshes, and were being dragged happily to the unknown regions beyond the valley.

"Must have been dwarfs," muttered Baker, taking a pinch of snuff and snorting a period to his speech.

"Like Ganty here," smiled Thel, her face gathering more wrinkles than the neck of a tortoise.

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I shrugged, huffily. They always made fun of my small stature when we were passing idle time. Just the way Baker and I teased Thel about her features. Thel and I never laughed at Baker though. He didn't invite humor.

"Smaller than Ganty," said Baker, thoughtfully.

"If such a thing was possible," added Thel, with less generosity.

We were speaking of the aliens that had once owned the town. Their single-storied buildings had ceilings high enough for our tallest people, but the entrances were squat and wide. They had left furniture of a sort which suggested their anatomic proportions fell into line with the shape of the doorways: large concave stools and circular wooden couches worn smooth with use.

"Why'd they leave, do you think?" I asked for the tenth time.

Thel replied, "Maybe they'll be back. Though I doubt it. Those slopes are at least a year overgrown. There'll be no crop this season and the pruning's late."

"You talk like a farmer," I muttered.

"I *was* a farmer," snapped Thel, "before. Didn't like it," she added with some asperity.

So there we were, the town was a gift from an unknown race. Unknown to us, that is. We had a fertile valley, more than adequate for our needs — it gave our population stretching space for several generations — and a good growing climate. It was as close to heaven as most of us wanted — Thel, Baker and me excluded of course. The town was a bonus, albeit a suspicious one. We knew about Greek wooden horses but this didn't seem to fit the case. There was nothing the aliens could possibly want that we would have, except ourselves. After the accident with the bell, which was not really an accident at all, we began to get an insight to the culture of the town's previous occupants.

On the journey I had courted a girl called Sally. She was the daughter of a cooper, whose barrel-making was obviously not a sought-after skill while we were crossing deserts and mountains. Once in the valley however, his services were very much in need; and whereas my own standing in the community was somewhat diminished, Sally's father had grown in status. The consequence of this was, he encouraged another of Sally's beaus — a carpenter named John Fennick — and my own nose was unwelcome past the doorjamb of Sally's new home. It was not that the cooper didn't like me. It was just that my prospects were zero-rated.

Naturally this turn in my fortunes — totally unexpected — was irksome to me. I tried to see Sally secretly, but it seemed that the gilt was peeling from my image. She was more interested in carpentry than tales of lone pathfinding. Thel told me I was lucky.

"You've got a head on your shoul-

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der's boy. That girl's got mincemeat between her ears. She'd have driven you starin' within a year. Find someone with brains in her head, not in her sewin' hand."

"Someone with a face like a Thai monkey?" I retorted cruelly, more out of embarrassment and chagrin than malice.

"Someone about three feet high," she retaliated, not in the least offended.

I took my horse and rode her as hard as I could towards the end of the valley, after this conversation, to try and let some of the steam out of my ears. I was gone two days. By the time I got back, grimy and sunburned, John Fennick was dead. Killed by a wall that knifed him in the back. Some people tried to say I was somehow responsible, but the circumstances of the murder were so coincidental, most of the town realized I would have had to have been a magician to have executed such a deed.

All along the outside walls of the gardens were stone seats where you could stop and sit if you were weary. They were low to the ground, in keeping with the other artifacts of the town, but useful for drunks and those carrying loads under a midday sun. Some of the old men had chosen favorite positions on busy pedestrian routes and would occupy these seats from dawn till dusk. Their lives already having gone by, they liked to watch others flow past. John Fennick had apparently been imbibing at an inn during the evening of his death and staggered home with a companion just after midnight.

The upper part of the town is built into the hillside on the edge of the valley, and while the Fennick place commanded a drop-away view of the paved streets down to the river, and the terraced slopes on the far side, it was a cruel climb. The drystone walls, with their occasional cool slate seats, were indeed well-situated to prevent punishment to limb and lung. John Fennick had sat on one of these while his friend, less able, had leaned one-handed against the wall further down, to gather his breath. Suddenly, according to his drunken companion, Fennick gave out an almighty scream, thrashed around for a few seconds, then slumped forward, "his arms dangling like an ape's, to his ankles."

People came out of their houses at that point, while racing adrenalin sobered the other fellow more rapidly than any synthetic drug. They found Fennick's body had been pierced through by a sword-long blade sprung from a crack in the wall behind the seats. The point of the instrument protruded a good twelve inches from his chest. The scene further dramatized. On arrival in the valley the occupants of the house had planted wisteria to cover the bare wall. Plants grow very rapidly in the valley, given the right treatment, and the wisteria had covered the wall. John Fennick had

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clutched at the plant in his death throes and pulled it across his body like a purple cloak.

By the time I arrived back in town, they had dismantled the mechanism in the wall and it afforded a great deal of mystery. As an instrument of murder it was elaborately fashioned. That the assassin was among ourselves was soon dismissed (much to my own relief), and the blame was placed on the town's former occupants. The length of the blade and considerable force behind the spring suggested that it was designed to penetrate a thick, squat anatomy.

The operation of the mechanism was fairly complex. It entailed simultaneous pressure on three points, two of them being supplied by a second party: in this case Fennick's companion, who had pressed just the right brick in the wall, while his left foot rested on a paving stone — the second trigger. The third was a depression which must have been activated by Fennick's elbow, near to the point in the brickwork where the lethal blade exited. So complex were the mechanical functions of the instrument, with its intricate levers and pulleys and cogs, and so complicated the operation, it seemed almost a ritual killing. Certainly as a murder weapon it was too elaborate, and why rely on your victim to supply essential assistance in his own killing? If it was necessary to have such a machine, why not just a single lever?

At least these unanswered questions absolved me from suspicion of being implicated. The very detail of the clockwork killer must have taken lengthy planning and infinite care in construction on the part of a skilled craftsman: quite apart from the fact that I would have had to strip down the wall and pavement before the eyes of other citizens. In any case it brought Sally no closer to my side. She spent her time consoling the distraught friend of John Fennick, whom she married a short while afterwards.

"She didn't deserve a runt like you anyhow," snorted Thel on the day of the wedding as I mooned around feeling sorry for myself. Baker grunted his own approval of theses sentiments, at the same time burning out his nostrils with grade-nine snuff.

Some time later I took a job with Jenny Ledbetter's father on his orange plantation to the south of the town. While he didn't encourage my advances towards Jenny, he didn't warn me off either; and since Jenny and I worked side-by-side in the fields, it was difficult to keep us apart. A feeling sort of *grew* between us, rather than flash-fired into sudden existence, and soon we were exchanging confidences. I found she had a lively mind. Thel was right — I did find it a necessary element in our relationship. In fact, and I don't mind admitting it; Jenny was cleverer than me in many ways. Perhaps not as shrewd, but her knowledge was wider-based and more

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informed than my own. I was stronger, physically. (This may seem a superfluous statement, but Thel was a woman and she could have broken me in two anytime she felt like it). We fell in love, gradually. The bond was stronger for it.

The town had a very strange effect on us all. It was a negative influence, and some put it down to godliness, or luck, or something mystical in our culture. But most of us realized it was the town. The fact was, after a year, no one had fallen ill. Normally, in a population the size of ours there was always someone down with a complaint. On average we should have had two dozen sick at any one time. But the truth was, after those people who had fallen ill during the journey had become well — or died — there was no more disease. No more insanity, even. The old people died occasionally, of physical complaints — heart failure mostly — but even they tended towards a fitness unknown before. Those that had suffered from things like arthritis still had their problems but to a much lesser degree. The doctors complained that they felt defunct. Broken bones mended rapidly and without complications. Only one premature death marred that year: John Fennick's. A woman who fell from a hay loft and fractured her skull and was expected to die, recovered in a miraculously short period of time. Further out in the valley one could sense a change in the air. Perhaps there was a central point, a key building, like the church, which affected all within a limited sphere of influence.

With the beautiful growing conditions, the balmy weather and the lack of physical and mental illness, it was near enough heaven. The bible says three score years and ten, and it seemed we were going to get our due whether we liked it or not. Aside from mechanical assassins of course, but you can't tear apart a granite-built town of alien interlocking blocks, engineered to withstand millenniums, with the handtools of colonists.

(Now that I can look back I think I can see some of the logic behind the alien devices. The elderly, in fact live well past their biblical quota, and do so in fitness and health. Many of our earlier deaths — and the lingering physical handicaps like arthritis — were overlaps from our former life. Now we are perfect, and when we die, *when*, we go out *phut* like a candle. No cancers dragging our bodies slowly over talons of pain. No bloated limbs or malignant, creeping sores. No terrible inner dark passages to navigate alone.)

But paradise has its own drawbacks. It can be excrutiatingly *boring*. Thel and Baker hated it. So did I, to a lesser degree.

I was with Thel and Baker when the explosion thundered through the streets of the town. We stared into each other's eyes in fright and incomprehension. On recovering, I was the first out of the door, followed by Thel,

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then Baker. The floating debris of our church tower was still disturbing the otherwise peaceful evening. The great pear-shaped bell, inherited from our unseen aliens, had exploded.

We surveyed the mess: half our adopted church had been destroyed. Two bodies had already been carried out and a third was beneath the collapsed masonry.

"What the hell was that for?" growled Thel, angrily.

Baker shrugged and I murmured something about, "Crazy natives."

We began levering the stonework and timber from the top of the pile, but there was little hope of finding a survivor underneath. Each of us had that little question "Why?" buzzing around in our brains the whole time we worked. Thel kept insisting that we had done the aliens no harm — a fact we were all fully aware of — so why should they leave booby traps all over the place?

"It's only one," I said.

"Two," she reminded me. "There was also Fennick."

"*Yeah,* Fennick," emphasized Baker.

They were right of course. There could have been dozens of similar devices scattered throughout the town. We worked on into the night under lights, but the third person was dead. After we found him we slowed down. There was no real rush to complete the job.

It seemed most of the town came out to finish the clearance, and whereas the majority of us had fallen into a lethargic, apathetic way of life, the fires were burning again. There were offers from carpenters and masons to rebuild the church, bigger and better than before. A glazier spoke of stained glass, something that had not been part of the original building. And a real bell-shaped bell was proposed by a guild of metalworkers. Tilers wanted to replace the old flooring with mosaic. Someone proposed widening the doorway and fitting solid wood doors. There was a great deal of enthusiasm.

Of course, it was a tragedy and there was a pall of sorrow on the shoulders of a few. Grief is private amongst us though, and we left the mourners to their tears. Someone, Baker I think, suggested we take some men and search outside the valley for the culprits, but the idea was not taken seriously. We were all too busy planning. There was a feverish kind of excitement in the air that was difficult to quell, even on the day of the funeral.

The aftermath included an inquiry into the cause of the explosion — the trigger, that is. After a great deal of deliberation the experts told us that it was pure chance that had caused the bomb to explode. The explanation was barely credible.

The great bell had had a clapper inside, but there was not a man or woman in the town strong enough to swing the beast to get it to sound. Since we liked the two ends of the day to be

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chimed in and out, the priests had been a little upset by the immovable metal pear dangling leaden from its enormous joint. The problem had been solved by gathering a pile of large pebbles from the bank of the river. Youths were engaged to hurl the missiles at the bell at prescribed hours of the day. One of these stones had detonated the bomb.

That a rock should accurately strike the inch-square detonator to the booby trap was not, in itself, unusual. In the course of time one of the boys would be bound to hit it: one year, a hundred years, they stood as much chance of hitting that spot as any other. But — the bell was not was designed for stone throwers. It had a clapper and the clapper would not have activated the charge in an eternity. Its striking circle was two feet away from the detonator. Also, the bomb needed a second pressure point within the church. Someone had to be standing on a particular slab in the room we used as a vestry. In this case, it had been a priest, who was unharmed by the explosion.

The chances of *accidentally* detonating the so-called "booby trap" were incredibly low.

"So what the hell did they do it for?" said Baker. "We could have been here a million years and not set it off."

"It's not only the bomb," I said to them. "What about John Fennick's death? I think that was a *kind* of accident too."

"Well, what is it then?" cried Thel, throwing her hands into the air. We all stared at one another without understanding. At that time I had just the smokiest notion of what lay behind the murders; clarification came later, after several more incidents, but by that time Thel and Baker had gone.

For two years no other freak booby traps entered our lives. We prospered. The vineyards and citrus fruit groves yielded their plenty; our livestock multiplied; from the river we reaped harvests of migrating fish. The community was in a comfortable position — no one wanted for food, clothing or shelter. Our only complaint might have been the dull routine. Life turned over, regularly, like the wheel of a clock: click, click, click, click.

"I'm going," said Thel one day, and she took a pack horse and went. Just like that. Something had snapped inside her. Baker had already gone with a contingent of young men and women. A break-away colonist group that wanted to push further into the interior. No doubt Thel intended catching them up, but she didn't say so. She waved until she was out of sight. I missed her terribly.

I stayed because I was married to Jenny and had responsibilities about the farm. Jenny was my anchor but, damn, I stretched the chain really tight the day Thel left. It almost snapped.

In the fifth year we had one or two minor incidents connected with the aliens. A cavity in a wall let out some noxious gas which, though not fatal,

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made the recipient ill for some time. A hearthstone suddenly spat a colored dart into a family group who were having their evening meal. It stuck in the wooden handle of the stew bowl, right in line with one of the children. A door released a blade which severed two fingers from a woman's hand. These incidents caused a flurry of excitement amongst the community for some while after each occurence.

Seven years after came a very dramatic death. A politician in the middle of a campaign speech threw his arms into the air and plunged thirty feet down Speaker's Steps. There was an arrow of a strange design protruding from his chest. It was believed to have been fired from a drainpipe on the side of our town hall. Putting the death aside, one could admire the intricate workmanship of the arrow, especially its flexible, folding, lacework flights. It was a beautiful, if deadly piece of craft.

I think by that time we had guessed the intentions of the aliens, who had built the town for themselves, after all, and not for us. Some of our people were for abandoning the place, and indeed one or two did leave in search of Baker's group, but the majority accepted a change in philosophy. We *allowed* a fragment of alien culture to enter our own, to fuse with it and become part of our way of life. Indeed, we *had* to accept it, or follow Baker. After living for so long in the valley, we had become attuned to its faults — its *one* great fault: *it was perfect*. The single flaw in it was that there was no flaw.

That this paradox should affect us as it obviously did the aliens, only showed how close we were to them in certain aspects. We had common ground in a loathing of unalterable rhythm. The natural (and supernatural) influences of the valley ordered our lives into harmony too constant to be acceptable. We needed the occasional hiccough to alter the pace, the timing, of our existence. *Heaven should not be without risk.*

The aliens had realized themselves that a life without change produces inertia. No new songs, no new poetry, no artistic progress. A Spartan existence eventually dies from apathy. So they built tragedy into their lives by patterning secret places of their town with deadly toys. Like toymakers, they had delighted in the design and mechanics of their devices: subtle, ingenious machineries as well as grand, dramatic objects pregnant with thunder.

Sorrow, yes, but excitement too. A flicker in the life line. A talking point.

"Did you hear...?"

Without them, the unalterable days follow each other like blank cards. All sense of time is lost and the brain blunts its edge. With them, celebrities are created; the reluctant widow, the heroic father. There is no need for blood feuds or vendettas. Our lives are tricked into alertness. Not only do we have the incidents themselves to snap

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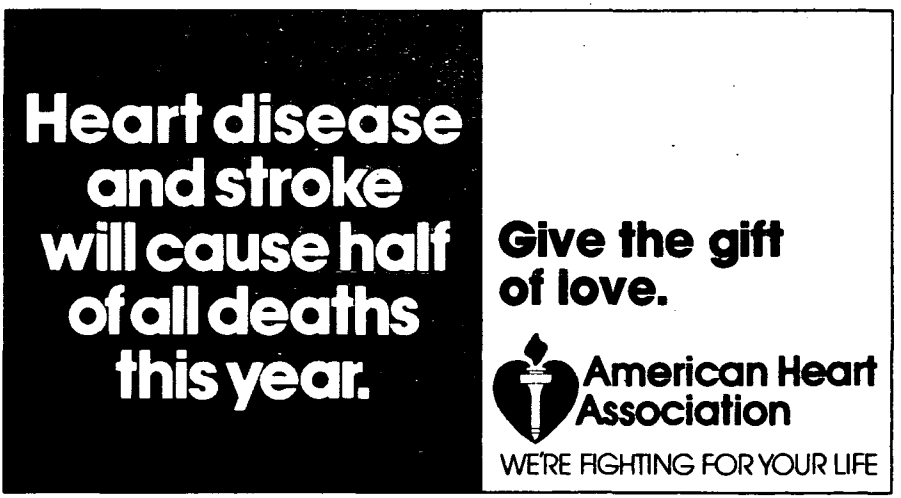
us into enthusiasm for life, we have the presence of all the still-hidden devices to consider. Every man, every woman is at constant risk, albeit that risk may be small.

We, each of us, have to look over our shoulder, keep our mental faculties primed, our reactions swift, for we are all potential targets. Lethargy will not be our inheritance.

And where did the aliens go? Some believe they moved on, for whatever reasons they may have had. I personally think they will return, which is not such a bad thing. There's room for both of us in the valley, and the interest we will create in each other will add further zest to our separate cultures. Perhaps they migrate to the mountains or the sea — to return *x* number of years later, a different generation — one that has no blueprints, no knowledge of the position of the devices?

Which pocket of rock in the town bears my name? I sit and wonder. Could I live without Jenny, or she without me? Will our son grow to manhood? A personal tragedy may have me hating the aliens and their tricky innovations — but the community as a whole will be rewarded with vivid images of death. My widow will be a queen in black. I will visit her grave in the orange grove, to place flowers and words upon the grass. My parentless son will have a trace of iron in his expression. Suffering creates character.

We could all grow old and die in our beds — but there is a chance, just a chance, that one of us will die young and beautiful. Such things dreams and stories are made of. Such things are written in songs. To be remembered is immortality.


Heart disease and stroke will cause half of all deaths this year.
Give the gift of love.
American Heart Association
WE'RE FIGHTING FOR YOUR LIFE

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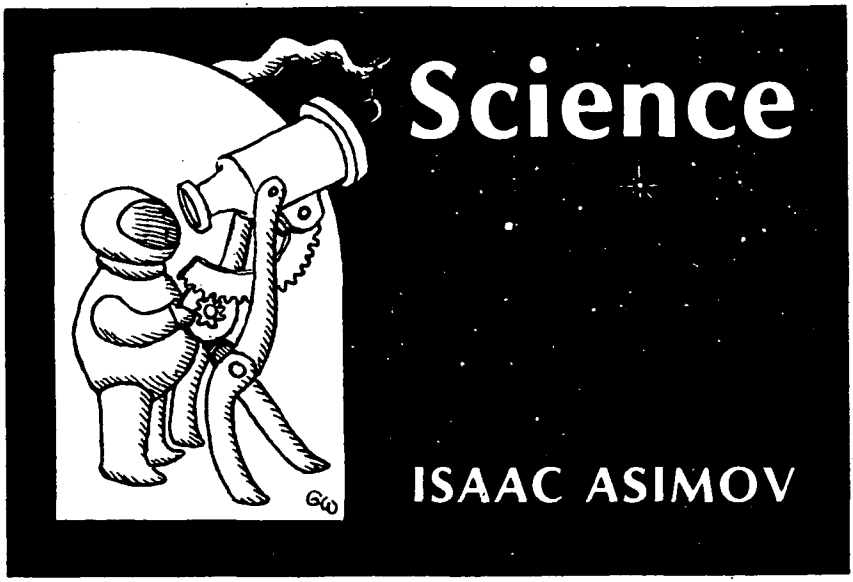

Drawing by Gahan Wilson

THE CIRCLE OF THE EARTH

Once, Janet and I were in a hotel room during the course of one of my lecture engagements, and a chambermaid knocked on the door to ask if we needed any towels. It seemed to me we had towels, so I said that no, we didn't need towels.

I had scarcely closed the door, when Janet called from the bathroom, saying that we did, too, need towels, and to call her back.

So I opened the door, called her back, and said, "Miss, the woman I have here in my hotel room with me says we do, too, need more towels. Would you bring some?"

"Sure," said she, and went off.

Out came Janet, with that expression of exasperation she wears whenever my sense of humor escapes her a bit. She said, "Now why did you say that?"

"It was a literally true statement."

"You know you said that deliberately, in order to imply we're not married. When she comes back, you just tell her we're married, you hear?"

Back came the chambermaid with the towels and I said, "Miss, the

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woman I have here in my hotel room with me wants me to say to you that we're married."

And over Janet's cry of "Oh, *Isaac*", the chambermaid said, haughtily, "I couldn't care less!":

So much for modern morality.

I thought of this incident recently in the aftermath of an essay I wrote for *Science Digest* in which I made the casual statement that the Bible assumes the Earth to be flat.

You'd be surprised at the indignant letters I got from people who denied vigorously that the Bible assumed the Earth to be flat.

Why? After all, the Bible was written in the day when *everyone* assumed the Earth was flat. To be sure, by the time the latest Biblical books were written, a few Greek philosophers thought otherwise, but who listened to *them*. I thought it was only reasonable that the men who wrote the various books of the Bible should know no more about astronomy than anyone else at the time and that we should all be charitable and kind to them, therefore.

However, the Fundamentalists are not like the chambermaid in that hotel. When it comes to any suggestion of a Biblical flat earth, they couldn't care *more*.

Their thesis, you see, is that the Bible is literally true, every word, and what's more, that it is "inerrant"; that is, that it cannot be wrong. (This follows clearly from their belief that the Bible is the inspired word of God, that God knows everything, and that, like George Washington, God cannot tell a lie.)

In support of this thesis, the Fundamentalists deny that evolution has taken place; they deny that the Earth, and the Universe as a whole, are more than a few thousand years old, and so on.

There is ample scientific evidence that the Fundamentalists are wrong in these matters, and that their notions of cosmogony have about as much basis in fact as the Tooth Fairy has, but the Fundamentalists won't accept that. By denying some scientific findings and distorting others, they insist that their silly beliefs have some value and they call their imaginary constructions "scientific" creationism.

At one point, however, they draw the line. Even the most Fundamental of Fundamentalists would find it a little troublesome to insist that the Earth is flat. After all, Columbus didn't fall off the end of the world, and the astronauts have actually seen the world to be a sphere.

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If, then, the Fundamentalists were to admit that the Bible assumes a flat Earth, their entire structure of the inerrancy of the Bible falls to the ground. And if the Bible is wrong in so basic a matter, it can be wrong anywhere else, and they might as well give up.

Consequently, the merest mention of the Biblical flat Earth sends them all into convulsions.

My favorite letter, arriving in this connection, made the following three points:

1) The Bible specifically says the Earth is round (and a Biblical verse is cited), yet despite this Biblical statement, human beings persisted in believing the Earth to be flat for two thousand years thereafter.

2) If there seem to have been Christians who insisted the Earth was flat, it was only the Catholic Church that did so, not Bible-reading Christians.

3) It was a pity that only non-bigots read the Bible. (This, it seemed to me, was a gentle remark intended to imply that I was a bigot who didn't read the Bible and therefore spoke out of ignorance.)

As it happened, my letter-writing friend was well and truly wrong on all three points.

The Biblical verse he cited was Isaiah 40:22.

I doubt that my correspondent realized it, or would believe it if he were told, but the 40th chapter of Isaiah begins that section of the book which is called "the Second Isaiah," because it was not written by the same hand that wrote the first 39 chapters.

The first 39 chapters were clearly written about 700 B.C., in the time of Hezekiah, king of Judah, when the Assyrian monarch, Sennacherib, was threatening the land. Beginning with chapter 40, however, we are dealing with the situation as it was about 540 B.C., in the time of the fall of the Chaldean Empire to Cyrus of Persia.

This means that the Second Isaiah, whoever he might have been, grew up in Babylon Captivity, and was undoubtedly well educated in Babylonian culture and science.

The Second Isaiah, therefore, thinks of the Universe in terms of Babylonian science, and to the Babylonians the Earth was flat.

Well, then, how does Isaiah 40:22 read? In the Authorized Version (better known as the King James Bible), which is *the* Bible to the Fundamentalists, so that every last mistranslation it contains is sacred to them, the verse, which is part of the Second Isaiah's attempt to describe God, reads:

"It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth..."

There you have it — "the circle of the earth." Is that not a clear indica-

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tion that the Earth is "round." Why, oh, why did all those bigots who don't read the Bible persist in thinking of the Earth as flat, when the word of God, as enshrined in the Bible, spoke of the Earth as a "circle."

The catch, of course, is that we're supposed to read the King James Bible as though it were written in English. If the Fundamentalists want to insist that every word of the Bible is true, then it is only fair to accept the English meanings of those words and not invent new meanings to twist the Biblical statements into something else.

In English, a "circle" is a two-dimensional figure; a "sphere" is a three-dimensional figure. The Earth is very nearly a sphere; it is certainly *not* a circle.

A coin is an example of a circle (if you imagine the coin to have negligible thickness). In other words, what the Second Isaiah is referring to when he speaks of "the circle of the earth" is a flat Earth with a circular boundary, a disk, a coin-shaped object.

The verse my correspondent advanced as proof that the Bible considered the Earth to be a sphere, is the precise verse which is the strongest evidence that the Bible assumes the Earth to be flat.

If you want another verse to the same effect, consider a passage in the Book of Proverbs, which is part of a paean of praise to personified Wisdom as an attribute of God:

"When he prepared the heavens, I was there: when he set a compass upon the face of the depth:" (Proverbs 8:27).

A compass, as we all know, draws a circle, so we can imagine God marking out the flat, circular disk of the world in this fashion. William Blake, the English artist and poet, produced a famous painting showing God marking out the limits of the Earth with a compass. Nor is "compass" the best translation of the Hebrew. The Revised Standard Version of the Bible has the verse read, "When he established the heavens, I was there, when he drew a circle on the face of the deep." That makes it more specific.

Therefore, if we want to draw a schematic map of the world as it seemed to the Babylonians and Jews of the 6th Century B.C. (the time of the Second Isaiah) you will find it in Figure 1. Although the Bible nowhere says so, the Jews of the late Biblical period considered Jerusalem the center of the "circle of the world" — just as the Greeks thought of Delos as the center. (A spherical surface, of course, has no center.)

Now let us quote the entire verse:

"It is he that sitteth upon the circle of the earth, and the inhabitants thereof are as grasshoppers; that stretcheth out the heavens as a curtain,

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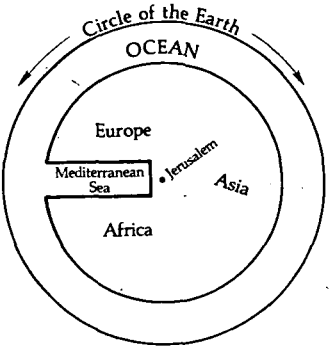
and spreadeth them out as a tent to dwell in:" (Isaiah 40:22).

Figure 1 — The Circle of The Earth



The reference to Earth's inhabitants as "grasshoppers" is merely a Biblical cliche for smallness and worthlessness. Thus, when the Israelites were wandering in the wilderness, and sent spies into the land of Canaan; those spies returned with disheartening stories of the strength of the inhabitants and of their cities. The spies said:

"...we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight." (Numbers 13:33).

Observe, however, the comparison of the heavens with a curtain, or a tent. A tent, as it is usually pictured, is composed of some structure that is easily set up and dismantled: hides, linen, silk, canvas. The material is spread outward above and then down on all sides until it touches the ground.

A tent is *not* a spherical structure that surrounds a smaller spherical structure. No tent in existence has ever been that. It is, in most schematic form, a semi-sphere that comes down and touches the ground in a circle. And the ground underneath a tent is *flat*. That is true in every case.

If you want to see the heaven and Earth, in a cross-section, as pictured in this verse, see Figure 2. Inside the tent of the heavens, upon the flat-Earth base, the grasshoppers that are humanity dwell.

Such a concept is reasonable for people who have not been very far from home, who have not navigated the oceans, who have not observed the changing positions of the stars during travels far north or south, or the behavior of ships as they approach the horizon, who have been too terrified of eclipses to observe closely and dispassionately the shadow of the Earth upon the Moon.

However, we have learned a lot about the Earth and the Universe in the

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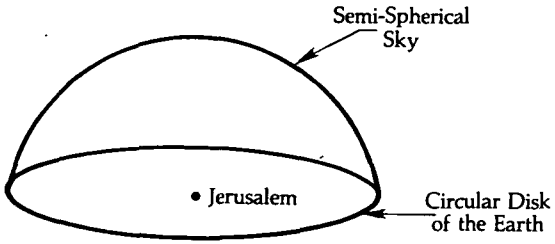
last 25 centuries, and we know very well that the picture of the Universe as a tent curtain draped over a flat disc does not match reality. Even Fundamentalists know that much, and the only way they can avoid coming to the conclusion that the Bible is in error is to deny plain English.

Figure 2 — Sky and Earth



And that shows how hard it is to set limits to human folly.

If we accept a semi-spherical sky resting on a flat-disc Earth, we have to wonder what it rests upon.

The Greek philosophers, culminating in Aristotle (4th Century B.C.), who were the first to accept a spherical Earth, were also the first who did not have to worry about the problem. They realized that gravity was a force pointing to the center of the spherical Earth so they could imagine the Earth to be suspended in the center of the larger sphere of the Universe as a whole.

To those who came before Aristotle, or who had never heard of Aristotle, or who dismissed Aristotle, "down" was a cosmic direction independent of Earth. As a matter of fact, this is so tempting a view that, in every generation, younsters have to be cajoled out of it. Where is the youngster in school who, on first encountering the notion of a spherical Earth, doesn't wonder why the people on the other side, walking around, as they do, upside down, don't simply fall off?

And if you deal with a flat Earth, as the Biblical writers did, you have to deal with the question of what keeps the whole shebang from falling.

The inevitable conclusion for those who are not ready to consider the whole thing divinely miraculous, is to assume the Earth must rest on something — on pillars, for instance. After all, doesn't the roof of a temple rest on pillars?

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But then, you must ask what the pillars rest on. The Hindus had the pillars resting on giant elephants, who in turn stood upon a super-giant turtle, which in turn swam across the surface of an infinite sea.

In the end, we're stuck with either the divine or the infinite.

Carl Sagan tells of a woman who had a solution simpler than that of the Hindus. She believed the flat Earth rested on the back of a turtle.

"And what does the turtle rest on?" asked Carl.

"On another turtle," said the woman, haughtily.

"And what does that other turtle—" began Carl.

The woman interrupted, "I know what you're getting at, Dr. Sagan, but it's no use. It's turtles *all the way down.*"

But does the Bible take up the matter of what the Earth rests on? — Yes, but only very casually.

The trouble is, you see, that the Bible doesn't bother going into detail in matters that everyone may be assumed to know. The Bible, for instance, doesn't come out and describe Adam when he was first formed. It doesn't say specifically that Adam was created with two legs, two arms, a head, no tail, two eyes, two ears, one mouth and so on. It takes all this for granted.

In the same way, it doesn't bother saying right out, "And the Earth is flat" because the Biblical writers never heard anyone saying anything else. However, you can see the flatness in their calm descriptions of Earth as a circle and of the sky as a tent.

In the same way, without saying specifically that the flat Earth rested on something, when everyone *knew* it did, that something is referred to in a very casual way.

For instance, in the 38th chapter of Job, God is answering Job's complaints of the injustice and evil of the world, not by explaining what it's all about, but by pointing out human ignorance and therefore denying human beings even the right to question (a cavalier and autocratic evasion of Job's point, but never mind). He says:

"Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding. Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? Whereupon are the founations thereof fastened? or who laid the corner stone thereof;" (Job 38:4-6)

What are these "foundations"? It's hard to say because the Bible doesn't describe them specifically.

We might say that the "foundations" refer to the lower layers of the Earth; to the mantle and liquid iron core. However, the Biblical writers never heard of such things, any more than they ever heard of bacteria — so

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that they had to use objects as large as grasshoppers to represent insignificance. The Bible *never* refers to the regions under the Earth's surface as composed of rock and metal, as we shall see.

We could say that the Bible was written in a kind of double-talk; in verses that meant one thing to the unsophisticated contemporaries of the Biblical writers, but that meant something else to the more knowledgeable readers of the 20th Century, and that will turn out to mean something else still to the still more knowledgeable readers of the 35th Century.

If we say that, however, then the entire Fundamentalist thesis falls to the ground, for everything the Bible says can then be interpreted to be adjusted to a fifteen-billion-year-old Universe and to the course of biological evolution, and this the Fundamentalists would flatly reject.

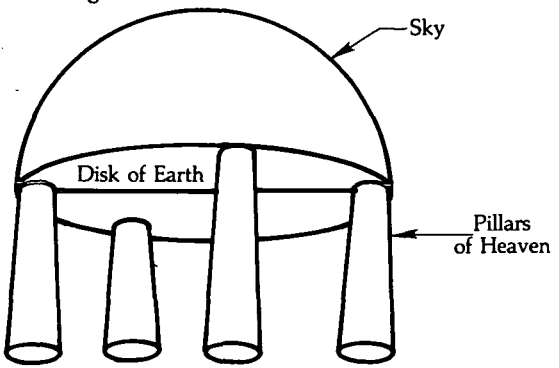
Hence, to argue the Fundamentalist case, we must assume the King James Bible to be written in English, so that the "foundations" of the Earth are the objects on which the flat Earth rests.

Elsewhere in the book of Job, Job says, in describing the power of God: "The pillars of heaven tremble and are astonished at his reproof." (Job 26:11).

It would seem these pillars are the "foundations" of the Earth. Perhaps they are placed under the rim of the Earth where the sky comes down to meet it, as in Figure 3. These structures are then both the pillars of heaven and the foundations of the Earth.

What do the pillars in turn rest on? Elephants? Turtles? Or is it pillars "all the way down." Or do they rest on the backs of angels who eternally fly through space. The Bible doesn't say.

Figure 3 — The Pillars of Heaven



And what is the sky that covers the flat Earth like a tent?

In the Bible's creation-tale, the Earth begins as a formless waste of

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water. On the first day, God created light and somehow, without the presence of the Sun, caused it to be intermittent, so that there existed the succession of day and night.

Then, on the second day, he placed the tent over the formless waste of waters:

"And God said, Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters." (Genesis 1:P6).

The first syllable of the word "firmament" is "firm," and that is what the Biblical writers had in mind. The word is a translation of the Greek "stereoma," which means "a hard object" and which is, in turn, a translation of the Hebrew "rakia," meaning "a thin, metal plate."

The sky, in other words, is very much like the semi-spherical metal lid placed over the flat serving dish in our fancier restaurants.

The Sun, Moon and stars are described as having been created on the fourth day. The stars are viewed as sparks of light pasted on the firmament, while the Sun and Moon are circles of light that move from east to west across the firmament, or perhaps just below it.

This view is to be found most specifically in Revelation, which was written about A.D. 100 and which contains a series of apocalyptic visions of the end of the Universe. At one point it refers to a "great earthquake" as a result of which:

"...the stars of heaven fell unto the earth, even as a fig tree casteth her untimely figs, when she is shaken of a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together;..." Revelation 6:13-14).

In other words, the stars (those little dots of light) were shaken off the thin metal structure of the sky by the earthquake, and the thin metal sky itself rolled up like the scroll of a book.

The firmament is said "to divide the waters from the waters." Apparently there is water upon the flat base of the world-structure, the Earth itself, and there is also a supply of water *above* the firmament. Presumably, it is this upper supply that is responsible for the rain. (How else account for water falling from the sky?"

Apparently, there are openings of some sort that permit the rain to pass through and fall, and when a particularly heavy rain is desired, the openings are made wider. Thus, in the case of the Flood:

"...the windows of heaven were opened." (Genesis 7:11).

By New Testament times, Jewish scholars had heard of the Greek multiplicity of spheres about the Earth , one for each of the seven planets and then an outermost for the stars. They began to feel that a single firmament

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might not be enough.

Thus, St. Paul, in the 1st Century A.D. assumes a plurality of heavens. He says, for instance:

"I knew a man in Christ above fourteen years ago, ... such an one caught up to the third heaven." (2 Corinthians 12:2.)

What lies under the flat disk of the Earth? Certainly not a mantle and a liquid iron core of the type geologists speak of today, at least not according to the Bible. Under the flat Earth, there is, instead, the abode of the dead.

The first mention of this is in connection with Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, who rebelled against the leadership of Moses in the time of the wandering in the wilderness:

"And it came to pass ... that the ground clave asunder that was under them: And the earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up, and their houses, and all the men that appertained unto Korah, and all their goods. They, and all that appertained to them, went down alive into the pit, and the earth closed upon them: and they perished..." (Numbers 16:31-33).

The pit, or "Sheol" was viewed in Old Testament times, rather like the Greek Hades, as a place of dimness, weakness, and forgetfulness.

In later times, however, perhaps under the influence of the tales of ingenious torments in Tartarus, where the Greeks imagined the shades of arch-sinners to be confined, Sheol became Hell. Thus, in the famous parable of the rich man and Lazarus, we see the division between sinners who descend into torment and good people who rise into bliss:

"And it came to passs, that the beggar died, and was carried by the angels into Abraham's bosom: the rich man also died, and was buried; And in hell he lift up his eyes, being in torments,and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried and said, Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water, and cool my tongue; for I am tormented in this flame." (Luke 16:22-24).

The Bible doesn't describe the shape of the Pit, but it would be interesting if it occupied the other semi-sphere of the sky, as in Figure 4.

It may be that the whole spherical structure floats on the infinite waste of waters out of which heaven and earth were created, and which represents primeval chaos, as indicated in Figure 4. In that case, perhaps we don't need the pillars of heaven.

Thus, contributing to the waters of the Flood, were not only the windows of heaven opened wide but, at that time also:

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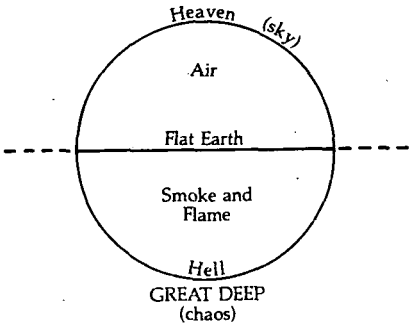
"...were all the fountains of the great deep broken up.."

Fig. 4 — The Underworld



In other words, the waters of chaos welled upward and nearly overwhelmed all of creation.

Naturally, if the picture of the Universe is indeed according to the literal words of the Bible, there is no chance of a heliocentric system. The Earth cannot be viewed as moving at all (unless it is viewed as floating aimlessly on the "great deep"), and certainly it cannot be viewed as revolving about the Sun, which is a small circle of light upon the solid firmament enclosing Earth's flat disk.

Let me emphasize, however, that I do not take this picture seriously. I do not feel compelled by the Bible to accept this view of the structure of Earth and sky.

Almost all the references to the structure of the Universe in the Bible are in poetic passages of Job, of Psalms, of Isaiah, of Revelation, and so on. It may all be viewed as poetic imagery, as metaphor, as allegory. And the creation tales at the beginning of Genesis must also be looked upon as imagery, metaphor, and allegory.

If this is so, then there is nothing that compels us to see the Bible as in the least contradictory to modern science.

There are many sincerely religious Jews and Christians who view the Bible in exactly this light, who consider the Bible to be a guide to theology and morality, to be a great work of poetry — but *not* to be a text book of astronomy, geology, or biology. They have no trouble in accepting both the Bible and modern science, and giving each its place, so that they:

"...Render therefore unto Caesar the things which be Caesar's, and unto God the things which be God's." (Luke 20:25).

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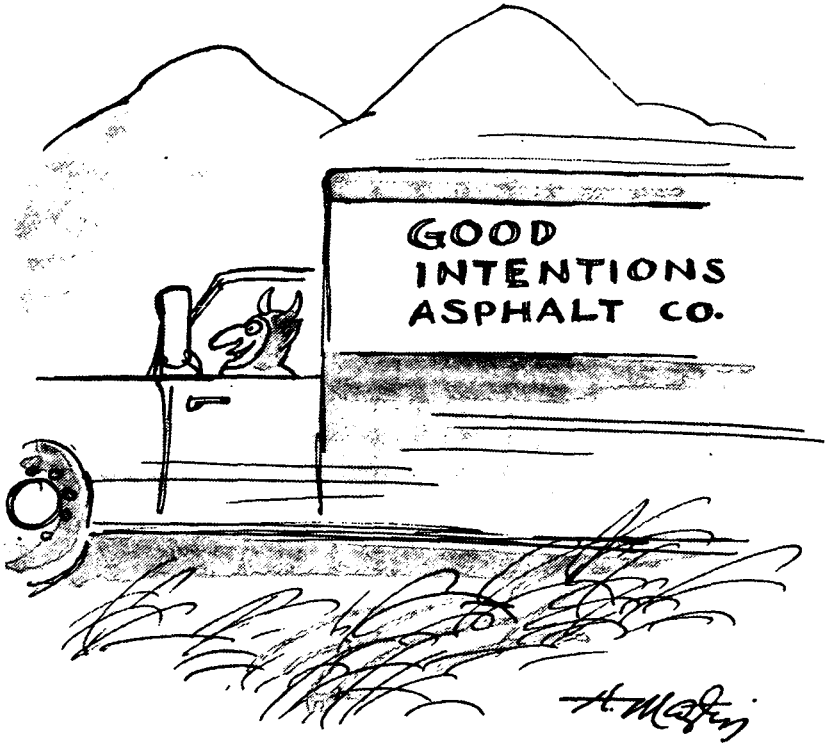
It is the Fundamentalists, the Literalists, the Creationists, with whom I quarrel.

If the Fundamentalists insist on foisting upon us a literal reading of the Genesis creation tales; if they try to force us to accept an Earth and Universe only a few thousand years old, and to deny us evolution, then I insist that they accept as literal every other passage in the Bible, — and that means a flat Earth and a thin, metal sky.

And if they don't like that, what's that to me?



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Here is a first-rate story about an American Indian named John Stranger, who was to have been a medicine man, but who finds himself drafted into service as a rigger in the building of a huge space station....

High Steel

BY

JACK C. HALDEMAN II and JACK DANN

/_1

0000 STRANGER, JOHN
0001 T.A.S.E. RESERVATION
D5-SOUTH DAKOTA-116
0002 SOC 187735-NN-000
0003 4 APR 2177 — 1:46 PM
0004
0005 IMMEDIATE REPLY MANDATORY BY LAW
0006 REFER T.A.S.E. DIRECTIVE 2045 E SECTION
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0008 GREETINGS JOHN STRANGER
0009 FROM THE TRANS-AMERICAN SPACE ENGINEERING CORP
0010
0011 CONGRATULATIONS UPON BEING SELECTED BY T.A.S.E.
0012 FOR ORIENTATION AND TRAINING ON STATION CENTRAL
0013
0014 YOU WILL REPORT TO YOUR TERMINAL INDUCTION BLDG
0015 ON 7 APR 2177 — 6:00 PM
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0018 DO NOT BRING TOILET ARTICLES OR A CHANGE OF CLOTHES
0019 ALL WILL BE PROVIDED
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0021 WELCOME ABOARD
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The old man walked beside John Stranger, staring down at the rocky trail. It was not a time to talk. His face was leather, as wrinkled as the earth. His lips were chapped and parched, as if they had never touched water. Years beyond counting had marked him, molded him. Now he was ageless, timeless.

The stark landscape stretched out below them: muddy columns carved by wind, deep ravines, vertical dikes, fluted ridges. It was desolate country. But it was their country. The way down would be difficult, but Broken-finger could climb almost as well as John. He often boasted that the Great Spirit would not make him weak and sick before taking him "south" — the direction of death. He had always been strong. He was an Indian, not a *wasicun*, not a white man. He would take his strength with him to the outer-world of the dead. That was his belief. That was his reality. It had always served him well.

Broken-finger was a medicine man. Since John Stranger was a child, the old man had taught him, trained him. That would all change.

They climbed down a sharp basalt cliff face, carefully searching out toe-holds and handholds. Their progress was slow, the sun baked them unmercifully. But they were used to it; it was part of their lives. When they reached a rocky shelf about halfway down the cliff face, they paused to rest.

"Here," Broken-finger said, handing John a thermos of bitter water. "We can wait while you regain your strength."

John felt dizzy again. Had it really been four days since he had climbed alone into the vision pit? Time had blurred, scattered like sand before the wind.

"You had a good vision," Broken-finger said. It was not a question, but a statement. He knew. It required no answer.

John blinked, focused his eyes. The spirit-veils were fluttering before him, shaking up the yellow grass and rocks and hills below like rising heat. He could see his village in the distance, nestled between an expansive rise and the gently rounded hills beyond. It had been his home since birth. Seventeen years had passed. It seemed like more. At times, it seemed like less.

The village was comprised of fifty silvery hutches set in a great circle, in the Indian way. Broken-finger used to say that a square could not have much power. But a circle is a natural power; it is the design of the world and the universe. The square is the house and risor of the *wasicun*, the squared-off, divided-up, vertical white man.

"Everyone down there is waiting for you," Broken-finger said, as if reading John's thoughts. "A good sweat lodge has been prepared to sear your lungs and lighten your heart. Then there will be a celebration."

"Why a celebration?" John asked as he watched a spotted eagle soaring in

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circles against the sharp blue sky. It was brother to the eagle in his vision. Perhaps the spirit-man was watching.

"The village is making you a good-time because you must make a difficult decision. Pray your vision will help you."

"What has happened?" John stoppered the thermos, passed it back to the old man.

"We received news from the *wasicun* corporation yesterday." He paused, saddened, and stared straight ahead. "They claim their rights on you."

John Stranger felt a chill crawl down his back. He stood up and walked to the edge of the shelf; there he raised his hands and offered a prayer. He looked for the spotted eagle and, as if in a vision, imagined that it was flying away from him like an arrow through the clouds.

"We must go now," he said to Broken-finger, but he felt afraid and alone, as if he were back in the vision pit. He felt hollowed-out inside, as isolated as a city-dweller. They climbed down toward the village together; but John was alone, alone with the afterimages of his vision and the dark smoke of his thoughts and fears.

Below him, the village caught the sun and seemed to be bathed in spirit-light.

With an easy fluid motion John unsnapped the end of his tether and moved to the next position on the huge beam. His feet automatically found the hold-tight indentations at the adjacent work station. For a brief moment his body hung free of any support. He was weightless and enjoyed the feeling of freedom. This was one of the few pleasures up here to his liking. The Earth hung above his head: a mottled globe, half darkness, half light. The cross-strut he needed floated slowly towards him. Anna was right behind it. Of all the damn luck: Anna. Anybody else. He shifted the joiner to his right hand and attached the proper nipple. There were twenty other floaters out on this shift; they could have sent someone else. The chatter on the intercom bothered him. So he tongued down the gain.

"Bellman to Catpaw Five." The direct communication cut through the static and low-tone babble. Mike Elliot was bellman; John was Catpaw Five. The bellman directed the placing of the beams, the floaters did the work.

"Five here," slurred John. Mike was a stickler for rules and regulations. From the deck he could afford to be. It was different outside.

"Strut alpha omega seven-one-four on its way."

"I have eyes," said John.

"Acknowledge transmission, Catpaw Five." Always by the book.

"Transmission acknowledged. Visual confirmation of alpha omega seven-one-four has been achieved. Satisfied?"

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"This transmission is being monitored, Catpaw Five."

"They're all monitored, so what's the difference? Fire me."

"I wish I could."

"I wish you would." Damn uppity bellman. They were all the same. "And while you're at it, why did you send Grass-like-light? She has second shift today."

"She goes by Anna, floater, and I put her out because I wanted to."

"You put her out because she's a royal pain in my —"

"You're on report, John."

"Stuff it."

"Firing on five. Mark."

The seconds ticked down in his head. It was automatic — and he had already forgotten Mike. At the count of zero, three low-grade sparklers fired. Aluminum trioxide, mined on the Moon. These one-time rockets were cheap and dirty, but all they needed. The boron filament beam, its apparent movement stopped, hovered a meter to his left. Sloppy.

"You missed," John said.

"You're still on report."

John shook his head, reached out with the grapple and pulled the near end toward the join. Mike was always excited, always putting floaters on report. It didn't mean a thing. People were cheap, but the ability to walk high steel wasn't common. They could hire and fire ten bellmen before they would touch a floater. Anyone could work the calculations, but walking the steel was a rare talent. There was no way he could ignore Anna.

"Down," he said, activating the local channel.

Anna fixed a firing ring around the far end of the beam and slowly worked it into position. She drifted easily, lazily. The beam slid gracefully into plumb.

"That's got it," he said. "Thanks," he added as an afterthought.

"You're welcome," she said in a dry voice. Without another word, she hit her body thrusters and moved away from him to her next position.

John ignored the snub and went to work with the joiner. Five of the color-coded joints were within easy reach; he didn't even have to move from the hold-tights. Some ground-based jockey had probably figured it all out before the plans were shipped up and the beams forged in space. As usual, they had blown the obvious cross-joins. He had to unhook for those, swing his body around to the other side. What looked easy on paper was often a different matter in space. His helmet lamp created a glare in his eyes as it reflected off the beam. The blind side joins were the worst: no support. He clipped his joiner back on his belt and took a breather.

The tube that connected the globes of the barbell was taking shape. He'd been on the job for almost a month, from the very beginning. The tube looked like a skeleton now, but soon the outer skin would be worked into

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place and this job would be finished. After that, it was on to the next assignment. He could see several other floaters working on the tube: anonymous, white-suited figures in the distance.

"That's got it, shift one," came the bellman's voice over the intercom. "Come on in."

John waited for the transport, really nothing more than a raft drifting by. It had been an uneventful shift; most of them were. They were ahead of schedule. That, too, was normal. Damn Anna, anyway. Damn Mike for slipping her on his shift. He knew how much that bothered him. John was used to his regular crew, knew their habits and eccentricities by heart. He didn't need other people. He didn't need Anna.

When the transport drifted by, he reached out and hooked himself on by the grapple. It was showy, but he didn't care. He looked to see if Anna noticed. She didn't seem to.

It didn't matter, he told himself.

"The skids are arriving right on schedule," Anna said, pointing at the nearest port. Outside, the small crafts blinked and glittered against the darkness. John Stranger didn't look; he made a point of not turning his head. It was loud in the wardroom, too many people packed into too small a place. After the riggers left, they would put up partitions, make it comfortable for the small number of people who would man the manufacturing station. Now they were packed in like fish in a tin. Riggers got little respect and fewer comforts. She leaned toward him across the small table, and it made him uncomfortable, although it didn't mean anything. Everyone leaned forward while resting in zero-g. It was reflex. A pencil floated past her face.

"So go have a good time," John said. The independent whores, male and female, always arrived just before the topping-off party. They were direct competition to the T.A.S.E.-supplied whores, who were more expensive but classier. It was almost time for the party. The job was almost finished. Soon the flag would be secured. Then would come the release, the time for the crew to become as blind and as drunk for as long as possible at the bosses' expense.

"What I do is my business," Anna said. "As it happens, I plan to have a good time. That is still permitted."

John twisted his foot compulsively into the hold-tight grid on the floor. "You've turned white enough. Go ahead and have a good time with the *wasicun*."

"I'm not white," she said defensively, pulling away from him. Only the hold-tights prevented her from floating to the ceiling. "You're a hypocrite," she said bitterly. "You're no more Indian than the rest of your friends." She waved her arm at the others in the room. "Some medicine man. Are *these* your people?"

John's face burned with anger and

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embarrassment. "Yes," he said. He was to have been a *wichasha waken*, a holy man, a healer. Clearly half the riggers — the floaters — were his own, his own blood. They were Indian, yet they weren't. They had turned away from their heritage, forgotten the way of the Sacred Pipe. They had jumped at the chance of reward, of a path out of the restrictive life of the ever-dwindling reservations. He could not understand, nor could he forgive. He had been taken away from his people, while most of them had left to become white men. A few, it was true, had been drafted. Anna was one.

She grinned at John, as if she could see right into him. "Spend the night with me," she said, baiting him. "Or aren't you man enough?"

"Our ways are not the same."

"Up here we are all the same," she said. "We are no longer in the woods, we are no longer dirtwalkers." She unlocked her cleats from the grid. Before pushing off she said, "John Stranger, I think you're impotent. I don't think you could even do it with *wasicun*."

John winced. Perhaps he had studied the ways of the People too long and didn't know enough about the world. But the People were the world!

The lights flashed twice, a signal. Fred Ransome, one of the bosses, walked through the wardroom shouting, "All right, riggers. Play time's over. Now move. Get yourselves back into the dark."

John rose, cleared his head. He was pulling a double shift, like most of the other floaters. He didn't mind the work, just the people he worked for. While he was working, he could forget — forget that he was outside the sacred circle, forget Anna's face and her words.

He would not take Anna, nor any of the whores. He was a *wichasha wakan*, a medicine man, even here. He was. He was. They could not take that away from him, no matter where they moved him, no matter what they made him do.

But in his heart, he was not so sure.

The shifts seemed to blur, one melting into another, as constant and predictable as the stars. Somehow immense loads of planking moved into place. Endless floating mountains of beams were connected into struts and decking. Slowly the skeleton grew, took shape. The two massive globes at opposing ends of the station were each large enough to house a fair-sized city. They dwarfed the tube that connected them, even though the tube itself was over fifty meters in diameter. Pipes, endless mazes of twisted wires, and interlocking tunnels ran through the length of the tube. Waldos walked down large tracks where the men would not be able to stand the gravity. In the middle of the connecting tube was a smaller globe, ringed with ports. It would hold the personnel manning the station.

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Now the silvery covering was in place, and what had once looked as light as a delicate mobile seemed to gain in mass as strut after strut had been overlaid with the metallic skin.

Like predators circling a great whale, the tiny skids and larger T.A.S.E. ships floated, patient as the coming and going of the seasons. Even from where he stood at the aft end of the barbell, John could make out the details of the juryrigged skids, odd pieces of junk bought or stolen, thrown together almost casually. The skids were dangerous, the reason for the high mortality rate of the freebooters. But they were free; free to die, work, or skiff off toward the asteroids, there to mine and get by until caught.

The freebooters were the people who had slipped through the otherwise smoothly running cogs of life in space. They belonged to no nation-state, no corporation, no colony. They came and went as they pleased, selling services and paying for what they needed, stealing if they could not pay. They were rarely bothered by the officials — in this area the T.A.S.E. Patrol — as long as they maintained a low profile. Over a hundred thousand people lived and worked in space, and the freebooters were an insignificant percentage. They moved easily, usually unseen, from the richest condo to the roughest manufacturing complex. If they made waves, they were dealt with, usually by dumping them out into space. Without a suit. If they showed some ability, they would be legally drafted by the corporation, as John had been. They were usually sent to the belt where they could cause no trouble.

The skids held pleasures of a coarse and vulgar nature. The T.A.S.E. corporation men on site made much use of them, the illegality of the situation adding greatly to the excitement. The freebooters were one of the darker sides of life in space.

But their lives were free.

The rest of the crew caught up with John. He clipped himself to Sam Woquini and they started to crab their way across the silvery skin of this dormant creature they had helped create. They worked as one, easily, as they had for the last year, without giving danger a thought, for their interdependence was mutual.

The Boss had ordered this final walk-through. As usual, he had wanted it done immediately. Everything had to be rushed. They had finished three weeks ahead of schedule and still the Boss hadn't let up. John tried not to let it bother him; it was just the city-dweller mentality, the *wasicun* way of life. They had yet to learn patience, to learn how to flow easily with the life-forces.

All across the station the floaters drifted, making their final visual check. It was largely unnecessary but protocol required it. They were dwarfed by the gargantuan structure they had given birth to, small specks against their grandiose creation.

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John let his mind wander as he and Sam made their lazy way across the surface. He recognized the small signs of his own work as well as those of others. It was strangely comforting. There was pride involved here, satisfaction at a job well done. That was one of the few rewards of his situation. It could almost make up for the static he caught from the Bosses — T.A.S.E. Brass — clowns, every one of them. It could never make up for the time they'd stolen from him, the years lost, away from the ways of his people. He felt the bitterness rise. He felt cheated.

The geodesic had docked and the party had been in full swing for over an hour. John had no intention of going. He sat with Sam on a large skid that had been used to haul material around during the construction of the station. Since the job was, for all practical purposes, finished, it had been moved well away from the station. A large collection of equipment hung in space around them, ready to be moved to the next job.

"Stranger and Woquini, get your respective butts over here. Time to make an appearance." Mike Elliot's voice came through scratchy and loud on the voicebox inside John's helmet. Elliot, the bellman, always seemed to be shouting. He knew the floaters kept their volume controls at the lowest setting.

"We're not going to make an appearance," said John. *Wasicun* always have to make noise, he thought. Only Sam knows how to be quiet.

"You're coming, and right now," shouted Elliot. "There's brass over here that wants to meet you. If you no-show, it's an automatic extension at my option. You know the rules. Right now I'm of a mind to tack a few years on. Might teach you a lesson."

That was always the kicker. They had draftees by the short hairs and could extend their tour for nearly any reason at all. When the corporations had worked out the conscription agreement with the government, they had held all the power, all the cards. Most of the land, too.

"I can make things hard for your friend." Elliot was getting frantic. His voice cracked. Must be getting a lot of pressure. John would have stalled on general principles, but there was Sam.

"Don't do it on my account," said his friend. "How hard can they made it for me? I've got a contract."

John knew about contracts; they were no better than the treaties of the past. They could be bent, broken, twisted in a thousand ways. He shook his head.

"We'd better go," he said. He looked at the Earth below him. The horizon seemed to be made of rainbows. It shifted as he watched. An erupting volcano traced a lazy finger of smoke. He'd been watching it for a month. A storm, one of the great ones, twisted and flickered in the ocean. All this beauty, and he had to go into a crowd-

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ed geodesic and make small talk with the T.A.S.E. brass, fatcats that had never been alone a moment in their lives and were driven to turn Earth and space into frogskin dollars.

There was a small cycle tethered to a docking adapter on the skid. John moved toward it. "Give me a hand," he said to Sam, and they swung the cobbled-up cycle into position.

The cycle was the usual floater variety; simple, made out of parts lying around. It was just a collection of spare struts joined together and a tiny thruster that powered it with bursts of nitrogen. Several other cycles of similar design were scattered around the construction site. Floaters used them to get wherever they were going and left them there for the next person.

John gripped one of the struts and aimed the thruster. "Hop on," he said to Sam.

"No, thanks," he said. "I'm going the fun way."

Sam grabbed a whipper and swung it over his head, catching it on the edge of the skid with a perfect motion that was a combination of long practice and an innate skill that could never be taught. He let it pull his body up in an arc and let loose of the whipper at the precise moment that would allow his angular momentum to carry him to the geodesic docked at one of the swollen ends of the manufacturing station. His body spun end over end with a beautiful symmetrical motion. He let out a loud whoop that rattled Johns' voicebox even with the volume turned all the way down. John smiled at his friend, then laughed. Sometimes Sam did crazy things, just for the fun of it. On the reservation he would have become an upside-down man, a joker, the holy trickster. Up here he had respect: he was very large and good with his hands, sometimes with his fists. Sam's whoop rose and fell. It was full of joy, the joy of living.

"Clear all channels," shouted Elliot. "What is *that*? Who's in trouble? Stranger, is Woquini okay? It sounds like he's dying."

"He's not dying," said John. "He's living." He doubted Elliot would know the difference. He squeezed the thruster and headed for the geodesic.

The T.A.S.E. geodesic globe was actually a pleasure station brought in for the topping-off party. It was expensive, but the corporation could well afford it. There was enough gambling, sex, and cheap thrills available to satisfy all but the most jaded palates.

Sleds, flitters, skids, and cycles clustered all around the end of the barbell-shaped station and the docked geodesic. Parties like this brought the whores and hucksters out in force, along with the independents looking for work, hoping to sign on with someone. Independents were always looking for work, existence was precarious without corporate patronage. There were even private cabs — small energy-

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squandering vehicles — bearing the insignia of other corporations. They had come to check out the competition, look over the terrain, make connections, wheel and deal.

Off in the distance solar collectors hung in silent, glittering beauty for kilometers and kilometers. To John, they were a beadgame in space, mirrors for Earth. They held beauty, they held usefulness. They were in balance. The image of a bird in flight, somehow frozen, came to John. It was perfect: harmony and balance. How could such things be made by the *wasicun?* All this for the frogskin.

John and Sam arrived simultaneously at the entrance to the geodesic. Sam's trajectory, which would have given a computer a headache, was perfect. They had both known it would be. They unsuited and allowed themselves to be dragged into the party.

The topping-off party was a tradition that went back hundreds of years, its origin lost in legend and fable. At completion of work on a project — be it bridge, barn, or skyscraper — a flag, or sometimes a tree, was placed on the highest part of the structure. It was a christening of sorts and accompanied by a party, nearly always at the company's expense. If the owners declined to supply the whisky for the party, the flag was replaced by a broom, expressing the workers' displeasure and embarrassing the company.

Like much of man's life on Earth, this tradition was carried into space. It was never planned, it just happened. It gave the men roots, a sense of place. For the same reason, the person who directed the placing of the beams was called a bellman, though bells hadn't been used as a signal in hundreds of years.

It was loud in the geodesic, much too loud for John. A mixture of floaters and corporation brass milled around, along with a scattering of other hangers-on, independents, whores. The corporation brass were easy to pick out by their obvious inability to handle zero-g. He picked out the floaters, equally obvious by their advanced stages of intoxication. They were a mixed ethnic bag: Scandinavians, Germans, Irish, Scots, Hispanics, the ever-present English. Most of them, however, were his own people, in blood if not in thought. As usual, they were making fools of themselves before the white man. He fought a rush of hatred, not only for the *wasicun*, but for his own people as well.

He was immediately ashamed, for in his heart he felt he was no different than the others. He found his oblivion in his work, his dreams, his love of the immensities of space. They found their oblivion in booze, women, and drugs. He was a freak, the outcast, not they.

The only other person he had met up here that came close to holding to the ways of the People was Sam. But Sam had chosen space, not been drafted. He seemed to have struck a balance between the old life and the new. In a

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way, John envied him.

He sometimes thought he saw some of the signs of the old life in Anna, though they were deeply buried. He got the feeling that she had turned her back on her past. John was a constant reminder of those times to her. Perhaps, he thought, that was why they never got along.

A young woman drifted over to John, offered him a nipple of scrag. He politely refused — it would be a double-bind if he was high and anything happened. Most of the floaters could handle it, but he knew he couldn't. He would be leaving the party as soon as possible.

A well-dressed man in his late sixties was holding court with a man about half his age. The younger man was a dirtwalker by all appearances. He stood perfectly still, as if one wrong move would send him floating away forever. His legs were tense, his feet jammed firmly in the hold-tights on the floor grid. His knees were locked. It would take a collision with a skimmer running full-bore to dislodge him. Uncomfortable as he looked, he was hanging on every word.

"Great return," said the older man. "Great return. You just can't beat space for high percentage income. Less hassles, too. No ecofreaks to muck around with. Hard to be accused of polluting space. Even harder to prove."

John shook his head, pushed away. He'd heard that conversation a thousand times, was sick to death of it. If they dragged him into their talk, he'd say something wrong and get into trouble for sure.

There was new gossip from the belt, chatter about business interests on the Moon, but mostly talk centered around the station they'd just finished. Everyone seemed to think it was a marvelous feat of engineering. When set into rotation, the station would produce a graduated gravity source, with a maximum of fifty-g's at the rounded ends. It could never have been achieved on Earth. What would eventually be manufactured there was a mystery to John: more square cities for all he knew or cared. It was a job, plain and simple. He was pleased that the floaters' end had worked out well; beyond that he had very little interest.

Two of the T.A.S.E. brass separated from a crowd and kicked over toward him. There was no easy way to escape, so he braced himself.

"So you're John Stranger," said one of them. "I hear you're one of our best men up here."

"Do you know me?" he asked, making an attempt to be civil.

The man smiled and tapped his ear, indicating that he wore a computer plug. He turned to his companion.

"Mr. Stranger here is an American Indian, as many of our floaters are. They work well on the beams, seem to have no fear at all. We recruit and draft heavily from the tribes. They seem to have natural ability in their

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blood. Wouldn't you say that was true, Mr. Stranger?" He took a sniffer from his pocket, inhalted deeply. Some sort of drug, a stimulant, most likely.

John was insulted. People made the most sweeping generalizations. He swallowed his anger. It would serve no purpose to start trouble with the brass. He'd spend the rest of his life in servitude that way.

"Some say that," said John, instantly sorry he'd compromised himself. A cowardly action. "I'd better get back into the dark," he added, moving away. The man caught his arm.

"Can't leave now," he said. "This party's for you, for all of you. Can't thank you enough. You men and women are the real backbone of our operation."

The thought turned John's stomach. "I really have to be going," he said. If he didn't get out, he was going to do something foolish. He almost didn't care.

"We're having a spin party later in the living-quarters on the station when they start the rotation. Just a few of us old boys and some selected friends. Ought to be pretty spectacular. If you're free, consider yourself invited."

"I'll keep it in mind," said John, swallowing his contempt, backing off. No way he'd show up at something like that.

Breaking away from the two men, he caught a glimpse of Anna across the room. She was talking with a young man, a pretty whore. She met his stare arrogantly, as if they were two opposing forces, two incompatible states of mind. She turned her attention back to the boy.

John was depressed. There were things about Anna that he felt drawn to, others that forced him away. It was a complex feeling. It was unsettling.

He had to get out of the geodesic, back into the dark, into space. He felt closed in, trapped. It was almost a claustrophobic feeling, a vague sense of uneasiness that brushed his heart, the pit of his stomach. He had never felt those things before, not even in the sweat lodge. All he knew was that he had to get out of there.

He found Sam and together they left the party, suited up. It wasn't until they left the geodesic that the pressure lifted from John. He shook his head. It had been all out of proportion to the situation.

He was still angry with himself because he hadn't stood up to the T.S.A.E. bureaucrat. The sense that he had betrayed something weighed heavily upon him, yet on another level he felt there had been no choice. It was a bitter feeling. He was no better than the others.

He was a hypocrite.

It was the first time John had been inside the computer bubble, the mobile command center for this operation. He wouldn't be there now if Sam hadn't talked him into it. Sam was a friend of

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Carl Hegyer, who was running the board. The bubble hung well away from the station; they had a panoramic view. Sam had thought John might like to watch the spin from there. He admitted it was better than being with the brass in the center of the station, or watching it with the drunker revelers in the geodesic.

Spin was imparted to the station by an extremely simple and cheap method. The surface of the station was covered with thousands of small, one-shot aluminum-trioxide rockets. The crew called them sparklers. They were dirty, but that didn't matter in space. What mattered was that they were cheap, composed of elements easily mined at the lunar complexes.

Through the programmed computer, Carl Hegyer could select the number and order of rocket firings. They would fire only a few at first, to get the station moving. Slowly they would increase the rotation by firing more and more rockets until the desired rate of spin was achieved. The point they were aiming for was that which would produce a fifty-g force at the rounded ends of the station. That would still leave the majority of rockets in reserve. The immediate area had been cleared in preparation for the firing. The geodesic, party still in full swing, had been undocked from the station and moved a short distance away. Most of the brass and dirtwalkers were in the swollen living quarters in the middle of the station.

The digital mounted next to the CRT screen on Carl's console ticked down. A signal flare soared across the darkness like an orange comet. The two-minute warning.

Carl broke the silence in the bubble. "All this will probably seem pretty anticlimactic," he said. "I'm not much more than the guy that pushes the plunger. It starts slow. Not much to see at first."

He was right. When the digital ran down to zero, John had difficulty even seeing the rockets fire. Carl pointed to a few scattered dots on the station's image on the CRT screen. "Those are the rockets firing," he said. "We ought to be seeing something soon."

John looked out the large, curved port at the station. There were more rockets firing now, sending out white sparks like small magnesium flares. As he watched, one edge of the station occulted a star. It was moving. Still slow, but the movement was perceptible.

Although John had worked on several projects since his training, this was the first time he had seen his handiwork put into motion. It impressed him, moved him, touched something deep in his heart.

For this was *wasicun*, the work of the white man. Yet somehow, as the ponderous station gradually picked up speed with its trail of metallic sparks, it seemed more like the work of the People.

There was symmetry here, balance, purpose. There were circles, closed cir-

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cles linked with the circular Earth. For a moment he forgot about the dirt-walkers on the station, the brawling party in the geodesic. Here was purpose, direction, in a fluid way. Relationships were being expressed that he could only guess at, not yet hold.

"It's beautiful," said Sam softly. "No one told me it would be beautiful."

John could only nod. He was afraid if he spoke, his voice would crack. Carl was busy at the console, fingers flying over the keyboard. Once in a while he would touch the CRT with a lightpen, triggering an individual rocket passed over.

It was going faster now, as fast as John had ever seen anything swing in space. He knew the station needed fifty-g's at the ends, zero-g at the center. It was necessary for the centrifugation and sedimentation of the material they were manufacturing. That seemed like a lot of g-forces, but the station was large, strong. It would handle it.

John saw it first, looking through the port. Carl saw it an instant later, through the computer. An unevenness, a ripple spread through the pattern of the rockets firing. Suddenly the board went wild, every tell-tale in the room went from green to red. Outside the port, the universe was lit with a blinding white flash.

"Jesus Christ," cried Carl, frozen. "No!" A whole bank of rockets along one arm had fired at once. Not one rocket, not ten; but hundreds of them.

The station swung in a ballet of death, caught in an ungainly pirouette by the uneven forces. The wrenching stresses pulled at the station in a way that could have never been anticipated. The metal twisted, buckled, finally reached the breaking point and sheared. Before their horrified eyes, the station broke apart, one end of the barbell ripping away. It headed inexorably for the geodesic, a precise arc of destruction. The rest of the station, out of control, cartwheeled wildly away.

Time froze. John was held by fear, the old fear taught to him by Leonard Broken-finger. It was the fear of one who can see with his heart, who can sense the spirits in the sweat lodge and in the vision pit. As bits of steel, aluminum, and boron silvered through space, catching the sun in their terrible dance, John became a *wishasha wakan*. He saw through the eyes of his people, was one with everything around him, was in the center of the circle.

Those aboard the geodesic must have tried to get out of the way. Yet it happened too fast, they had no chance. John's people were in there, his spirit reached for them.

The terrible fear, the crawling fear broke through his heart. "Oh Wakan Tanka, Great Mystery, all those people, don't let them die...." John felt the wings of Wakinyan-tanka, the great thunderbird. They were made out of the essence of darkness; they were as cold as ice, yet they burned his skin.

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The geodesic was struck dead center. It burst apart as broken metal and broken people were ripped and scattered in a thousand different directions, tossing and tumbling end over end.

He heard himself screaming; it was as if he were back in the vision pit, and he remembered: *Wakinyan-tanka eats his young, for they make him many; yet he is still one. He has a huge beak filled with jagged teeth, yet he has no head. He has wings, yet he has no shape.*

From somewhere distant, Sam yelled: "Do something, Carl, do something."

From somewhere else, came Carl's voice: "I can't."

And Sam: "Save the others."

Carl: "I can't stop it. Calculations are too complex. I can't."

John felt the cold breaking of death, the death of all, Indian and *wasicun* alike. He broke, and was made whole. He pulled Carl from the chair, sat down in front of the computer console. Sam yelled, Carl screamed. These were disruptive forces, he blocked them out, ran his fingers lightly over the keyboard.

He touched a button and a single rocket fired on the wildly careening remains of the station. He touched another button and a rocket fired someplace else on the skin of the station. There was a rhythm, a balance. Action and reaction, all parts of the whole.

Gently he felt his way into the heart of the computer. He did things, things happened. Forces were moved, stresses transposed from one place to another. It was all a matter of balance, of achieving a point of equilibrium. The computer was a prayer and he was in the pit again, close to the spirits that flicked in the dark and the thunder beings that carried the fear. His fingers danced over the keyboard. He felt, rather than saw, the forces he was manipulating. It was internal, not external: he was part and parcel of the things he did. He grabbed the lightpen and stroked the image of the runaway station on the screen. Under his fingers more rockets burst into life, counterbalancing the undesired motion. With the sureness of an ancient hand painting a Hopi jar, he sought out the proper forms, the patterns. The station slowed.

The fear, the ancient fear carried by prayer, was breaking him. It gave him the emptiness the *wasicun* built, transforming it into a wisdom. He frowned, added a few last strokes with the lightpen, tapped a few more buttons. The station stopped, motion arrested.

John slumped forward, drained of energy. He shook himself, looked around, half expecting to see the rolling desert, the towering mesas. Instead he saw Sam and Carl, though he didn't recognize them at first.

They stared at him with amazement, with fear, unable and unwilling to move, to break the spell. They could not comprehend what they had just seen.

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John looked at them and understood that, and more. Much more. He stood.

"We'd better go," he said. "Some of them may still be alive."

They followed him. They would have followed him anywhere.

It was cold on the mesa top; the sky was just beginning to lighten. Leonard Broken-finger crouched at the opening of the vision pit. He held a bag in one hand and rested himself against the wall with the other. The boy in the vision pit made stirring noises. His name was Jonas Goodbird and he was barely more than a child. It was age enough.

"You've been here four days," said Broken-finger. "Your vision quest is over. I hope Wakan-tanka has helped you."

"I'm still alive," said Jonas in a quavering, unbelieving voice.

"Of course you are; though by all appearances, not by much." He laughed, but his lips were tightly closed, so the laugh could play only in his throat and not in his mouth. For as long as anyone in the tribe could remember, the medicine man could not smile because his lips would break and bleed. Children made a game of trying to get old Broken-finger to laugh and break his lips. They had never succeeded.

The boy was getting ready to leave the vision pit. It would take a few minutes for him to gather his wits. Broken-finger left him to this and walked to the edge of the mesa. He faced east, standing rigid, standing tall.

The dry, cracked gullies stretched out below him, their colors muted in the morning mist. He felt old, but was not distressed. All his life he had been surrounded by the canyons, the towering rock formations. Time meant nothing to them. A man did what he could.

He thought of others he had walked down from the vision pit. There had been many. Some blurred into the distant past, some stood out. He thought of John Stranger, gone now three winters, taken by the *wasicun*. He had been special; it seemed the spirits lived through him.

A field mouse nudged his foot, a lizard scuttled across his leg: he stood that still. The sun broke the horizon. He felt the presence of John Stranger.

He raised his arms to the heavens, stood that way for endless moments staring at the rising sun. He felt the cold brush of wings.

Wakinyan-tanka eats his own young, for they make him many; yet he is one. He has a huge beak filled with jagged teeth, yet he has no head. He has wings, yet has no shape.

He felt these things, and more. There were terrible things happening. There were beautiful things happening. It was a time of changes, a shifting of the order. The cold wings brought him thoughts of John Stranger.

Arms still high, tears ran down his cheeks. There was sadness. But sadness was not the whole; there were other things brought to him on the icy wings

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of Wakinyan-tanka. They stirred him deeply.

He smiled for the first time in fifty years. It was a gentle smile, it came from his heart. There were good things happening for the People, he could feel it. They would come at high cost, but they would come.

His lips cracked and blood ran down his chin, dropped to his chest. His arms did not waver.

They arrived at the ruined station before the summoned rescue vehicles. From the outside it looked to be the disaster it was. The end that had torn off left jagged remains; a twisted mass of beams, wires, and pipes. John led them to the living quarters in what had once been the middle of the station. It appeared intact but had been under considerable stress. What g-forces it had been subjected to could only be guessed at.

It was pitch-black inside. There was still air inside, stale, but breathable. John flipped back his visor and turned on his lantern. He could hear low moans. Moans meant life.

And what of life, of death? His people had died in the geodesic, he had been unable to help them. These that lived, these he saved, were of the *wasicun*. He had done what had to be done, led by the thunder spirits. There were reasons for everything.

His lamp stabbed through the blackness. Bodies floated in horrible, contorted shapes. Here and there an arm waved, a leg moved. Twisted wreckage was everywhere.

They worked together quietly, with purpose. They separated the living from the dead, did whatever they could for those who hung in between. Some they lost, some they saved. John drifted to the floor grid. It was twisted and buckled, people were trapped there. He worked at freeing them.

A soft voice called his name. A hand touched his shoulder. Anna. She lived.

"I thought you were dead," he said. "Dead with the others on the geodesic."

"I ... I came here. It was...." Her voice trailed off.

Suddenly the chamber was filled with light as the rescue crew entered. They were efficient and noisy, barking orders everywhere. They took over. A part of John relaxed. In the bright light, Anna looked terrible. The side of her face was purple with a large bruise, her left arm hung at a funny angle. She was staring intently at him.

"You've changed," she said slowly, reaching out with her other hand to stroke the side of his face. There was awe in her voice, tinged with fear. She saw in his face things of the People. It was like looking into the past through the eyes of her mother's mother. There were things there that frightened her, things that made her proud.

"I am what I always have been," said John.

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He saw many things, good and bad. The *wasicun* controlled his body, but not his spirit. There were things to be done and he had been called to do them. It would be a difficult time, but a good time for the People.

The cold wings of Wakinyan-tanka brushed his soul. The thunderbird would be with him always, as it was in the instant of death, the instant of salvation. He was part of the circle, perhaps in the center.

A long road lay ahead. He had but taken the first step.

```
5641    //STRANGER JOB
5642    (3014,5002,1,1,0), 'COL=1, CAP#3',
        CLASS=Q

5643    //EXEC WATFIV
5644
5645    $JOB
5646    STRANGER, JOHN SOC
        187735-NN-000
5647    TASE BILLET OZMA
5648
5649    ACCESS CLASSIFICATION LEVEL
        THREE CONFIDENTIAL
5650    PASSWORD: REDMAN
5651
5652    STOCHASTIC ANALYSIS
        FOLLOWS
5653
5654    INTUITIVE RIGHT CHOICES IN
        DOUBLE BLIND SITUATIONS
5655    TRIALS = 100
5656    SUCCESS RATE = 100%
5657
5658    KINESTHESIC AWARENESS
5659    TRIALS = 100
5660    SUCCESS RATE = 100%
5661
5662    PROBABILITY THIS DUE TO
        CHANCE APPROACHES ZERO
5663
5664    CONCLUSION:
5665    SUBJECT INTUITIVELY MAKES
        RIGHT DECISIONS IN
5666    APPARENTLY AMBIGUOUS
        SITUATIONS.
5667    SUBJECT HAS HIGH AWARENESS
        OF SURROUNDINGS AND
5668    RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN OB-
        JECTS IN HIS ENVIRONMENT.
5670
5671    NOTE: SUBJECT UNCOOPERATIVE
5672
5673    WEAKNESSES: TRIBAL LOYALITY
5674    CLOSE RELATIONS:
5675    LEONARD BROKEN-FINGER SOC
        15782-NN-863
5676    ANNA GRASS-LIKE-LIGHT SOC
        16364-NN-347
5677    SAM WOQUINI SOC 13837-NN-676
5678    EXPLOIT WITH EXTREME CARE
5679
5680    THIS SUBJECT IS POTENTIALLY
        DANGEROUS
5681    THIS SUBJECT IS POTENTIALLY
        USEFUL
5682
5683    RECOMMENDATION: OBSERVA-
        TION, MANIPULATION & CON-
        TROL
5684    /*ROUTE PRINT REMOTE 7
5685    STOP
5686    END
5687    2 NOV 2180 — 9:14 AM
@ END   SOC 187735FILE-NN-000
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